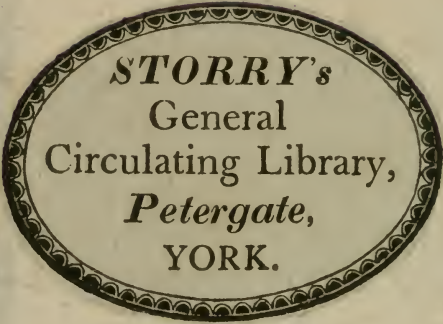
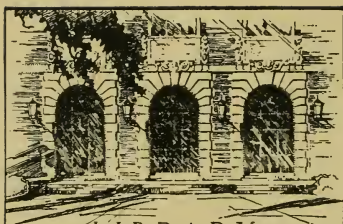




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AN

Old Family Legend;

OR,

ONE HUSBAND AND TWO MARRIAGES.

A ROMANCE.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

BY

JAMES NORRIS BREWER,

AUTHOR OF

*A WINTER'S TALE, SECRETS MADE PUBLIC, A DESCRIPTIVE
AND HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF SPLENDID PALACES, &c.*

"I'll read you matter, deep and dangerous!"

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AN OLD FAMILY LEGEND.

CHAP. I.

OF the visitors at Waltham castle only a very few now remained. One public table was always preserved during the residence of the earl, in the great oaken hall. Thither the traveller repaired, and feasted one day in luxuriance; the vagrant sportsman, too, found a seat beside that board; and, now that king Henry had commenced his predatory visitations of the minor religious houses, it was not unusual to see the bare-footed pilgrim,

or mendicant priest, an occasional partaker of the pompous hospitality which prevailed. But in this hall earl Rowland himself seldom dined. His temper affected shade and retirement. Still, he took pleasure in the reputation of baronial magnificence, and would occasionally join the motley throng at the public table, where, seated on a distinguished eminence, he received the homage of the train who fed on his bounty. To this spot he now sometimes conducted his few remaining visitants, but more frequently he entertained them in a private apartment; and, even there, he often left them, in the height of revelry, and retired to the deep seclusion of his chamber.

In regard to Matilda, his conduct was cool but inflexible. He avoided all opportunities

portunities of private communication ; but declared, through the medium of lady Gilibert, the unalterable firmness of his wishes for her union with sir Everard ; and would not listen to any hints respecting the possibility of his daughter's inclinations pointing in a contrary direction to his own.

Thus sanctioned by the approbance of the earl, sir Everard was unremitting in his endeavours to attract Matilda's notice. She did not dare to treat her father's will with so much open contumely as to remain in the entire privacy of her own apartment ; and the moment she entered a gallery, or strayed forth on the ramparts, the sedulous sir Everard was invariably at hand. The recurrence of this detested circumstance was so continual, that she sometimes almost fancied he

must have set a spy on her actions. But she was so little versed in artifice and machination, that she derided the idea as soon as it arose, and felt convinced that accident alone befriended the alarming wishes of her persecutor.

Sir Everard was new to love, but he was formed to penetrate the wiles of passion. His jealous watchfulness never slept; but he speedily learned to disguise the most bitter throbs of suspicion; and feigned a mood of thoughtless jocularitv even when he meditated the deepest investigation of Matilda's thoughts. Secure in the patronage of the earl, he viewed the possession of Matilda's person as the unavoidable attainment of perseverance, and studiously counterfeited the distant reverence of mingled respect and tenderness, with a view of lulling the apprehensions

prehensions of Matilda, and of betraying her to a habit of unsuspicious communication.

This affected distance of deportment was not altogether destitute of effect. Matilda was aware of the necessity of abstinence from all present fervor of opposition. She mildly, though with precise distinctness of expression, stated the impossibility of her ever listening to overtures like those he had once presumed to obtrude on her notice, but avowed her readiness to receive, with all due attention, the friendly services of any visitant who claimed the sanction of her family halls. Still, while she spoke, she turned with horror from the man whom she considered as the deep and secret enemy of her father's peace. Thus both placed stakes at the dangerous game of deception ;

tion ; but Matilda played with an artless hand and unpractised bosom ; her opponent was the child of mystery and wiles—and the odds were dreadful. But Matilda's chief object, in her own estimation, was to wear away the passing day without danger. Alas ! the morrow was likely to arrive without altering the complexion of her fortunes ! But youthful grief delights in procrastination, for Hope holds forth a delusive banner, and points to each unborn hour as one pregnant with unprecedented charms of accidental felicity ;—not that Matilda entirely relied on the occurrence of fortuitous circumstances for future relief and consolation. While the trial was likely to be distant, she thought that she could rather venture on the danger of confessing to her father the irretrievable imprudence

dence of which she had been guilty, than continue to submit to advances which seemed to pollute the purity of her hand, and which were likely to encroach on the peace of her husband. Now that the hour was not present, she determined on making this confession immediately on the return of Cuthbert; for she felt that death would be preferable to the continued labour of deceit, and even a father's malediction less dreadful than a tacit attention to the overtures which insulted a husband, and rendered her an object of abhorrence in her own consideration.

Such were the motives of her conduct, and such the intentions of her more active hours of reflection. But, through every minute not interrupted by the interference of sir Everard, all her thoughts

and all her fears were directed to the couch on which Cuthbert lay, wan, comfortless and sick. Many long days had passed, and the wind had blown from every quarter, yet no tidings arrived from the inhospitable coast of Spain! She visited the monastery; but no "trusty brother" solicited her notice, as she approached or quitted the shrine, to which, alas! she bore a listless heart, save in the moments when she tendered her orisons for a husband's welfare. Agatha, the soft-worded consoling Agatha, watched from her turret window for "the servitor of sir Cuthbert." Her eye strayed through break and dingle, and left no spot of the level green-sward unsearched. But sir Cuthbert's servitor failed to appear! Yet was Agatha prepared with kind reasons for the seeming delay; and
if

if these did not always convince, they seldom failed to impart some portion of hope and comfort.

Lady Gilibert beheld, with much compassion, though not without some disdain, the continuance of Matilda's grief; and the unabated spirit of her mild resistance to the wishes of her father. But the lady Gilibert's anxiety was now divided, and curiosity claimed a share of her feelings. She had observed, for many days, the striking peculiarities of earl Rowland's demeanor—his abstraction of thought—his convulsive bursts of pointless unsolicited mirth, and the weighty despondence which often arrested his smile at the board of merriment. She had noted the carefulness with which he endeavoured to disguise these emotions; and his effort at deception she received

as a convincing testimony of the singularity of the distress which preyed on his mind.

In the sincerity of her heart, Lady Gilibert had little affection for the Earl. His deportment, during the absence of her late lord, had once caused many strange thoughts to pass across her fancy; and his conduct, when intelligence was received of her husband's fall, had completed the distaste which she felt towards his character. But earl Rowland was a man accustomed to achieve his purpose, if art and blandishment were the requisite talents; and when lady Gilibert so unexpectedly returned to reason, and revived to health, it was his wish to attract her friendship, and to persuade her to reside within the precincts of his castle. In regard to the latter point he succeeded;
the

the former was not the work of a day. But lady Gilibert's heart was vacant; or occupied, at best, by the pale shadows of her lost husband and child. Every fresh year produced a new link to bind her to the family whose name she bore. She learned to respect Rowland as the successor of earl Philip; his wife she loved as a sister; and on Matilda she bestowed such caresses as she would have lavished on the smiling babe which death had torn from her anguished bosom.

The wild and mysterious deportment of the earl now awakened all those half-formed, crude, sentiments of doubt with which she had formerly regarded his character. It was not as earl Rowland, but as the representative of the Walthams, that she was anxious to decipher the mystery which oppressed him. Under

the impulse of this motive, she determined to take advantage of the first private moment for the purpose of claiming a participation in his troubles, as the allied adherent of the family interests.

On an evening when Matilda was vainly looking from the window of her turret for the appearance of a messenger from Cuthbert, the lady Gilibert passed along the galleries, and approached the room of earl Rowland's retirement. The frequency of her communications with the earl, on the subject of Matilda's espousals, warranted the boldness of her approach; and she entered the anti-room, with an intention of informing the earl of her presence by means of his attendant. But the page, whose duty it was to watch on that spot, was absent. The door of the earl's room was not closed,

closed, and the lady Gilibert, after slightly knocking, ventured to enter.

The shades of evening had already obscured this apartment, the windows of which were small, and rendered dim by the various devices painted on the glass; but, by the light of the wood which blazed on the hearth, lady Gilibert perceived that the earl was there, and reclining on his couch. She advanced to the centre of the room, when, by a ray of light from the hearth, which fell on the countenance of the earl, she saw that he was sleeping. She would have withdrawn, but, at that moment, he lifted his arm, and sighed deeply. Her eyes were involuntarily fixed on the couch, when she saw that the earl grasped in his right hand a drawn sword. The light fell more strongly on his face; the lip quivered, and

and the eyes opened and shut with convulsive quickness. He slightly essayed, in his slumber, to raise his head; then struck his breast with his hand, and heaved a tremulous groan.

“ Oh, God of pity !” murmured lady Gilibert, “ is not that throbbing heart quiet, even in sleep ? Could humility gaze on this distempered couch, how great would be its triumph !”

The earl faintly raised his sword-arm. Every sinew seemed strained in the futile efforts of his troubled fancy. His eyes were turned in the sockets, till the whites only were perceptible. “ Stand off !” he murmured, in a thick low tone ; “ I bear a charm against your weapon.— He shall die ! Strike deep ! Let the blow enter his heart !”

The lady Gilibert shuddered. “ Oh,
horrible

horrible vision !” ejaculated she, faintly. “ Sure, the host of Heaven slumbers, when the man of peace visits the bloody tumult of war in his nightly fancies ! God keep the souls of those I hold dear from visions that render the face so fearful—the voice so terrific ! Oh ! close those horrible eyes, kind sleep ! they scare good angels from the couch.”

“ Arm, arm !” exclaimed the earl, with fluttering agony ; “ we are surrounded ! —The castle is fired !—Mind not his screams—blood will hide his hideous features ! Stab quickly, or they come !” He forced his arm forward, and, in the feeble eagerness of the action, his sword fell to the ground. The noise awaked him. He started from his couch, and was calling to his attendant, when he beheld the form of lady Gilibert, obscure in twilight,

light, and fearful from the expression of horror contained in her attitude.

The earl fell back, and covered his eyes. "Dreadful spectre," said he; "avaunt! my hands are bloodless.—Avaunt! or bear me to the grave, and bury me in midnight."

"Peace to your couch, my gentle lord!" returned she; "I ventured to obtrude on your privacy, respecting my niece Matilda."

"Matilda!" repeated the earl; "and art thou not then——Am I still in a vision? Approach, and touch me!"

When she drew nigh, he seized her hand, and starting from his couch, stamped with his foot for his attendant.

"Your page was absent, my lord," said she, "and therefore I presumed——"

"To enter my presence with less ceremony

mony than is due to the hind's pillow," interrupted he. "Adieu, lady! my servitor is now in waiting, and will precede you to your chamber. Matilda! God wot! I did not imagine that her ambassadress would need a bar of iron to restrain her from my privacy!"

"Adieu, my lord of Waltham!" said lady Gilibert. "Resume the slumber I so unwittingly molested, and gentler thoughts be the companions of your pillow!"

Lady Gilibert had scarcely quitted the anti-room, when the earl regretted that he had suffered her to depart without farther converse. The indistinct features of each chimera by which his sleep had been assailed, pressed on his recollection, and he ardently wished to ascertain whether any words escaped him which had
been

been overheard by his officious relative. He hastened to the door, and was about to recal her, but his pride turned indignantly from the idea. He paced the chamber, and lifted his sword from the ground. The blaze on the hearth had died away, and gloom began to gather thickly around him. He shuddered at the approach of darkness. The faint outline of his own shadow met his eye, and he started aside in dismay. The sudden murmur of the cricket was louder than a war-trumpet to his ear, and the footstep of his faithful page seemed the cautious tread of an assassin. He pressed the handle of his sword to his beating heart.—“Ha! is it come to this?” thought he. “Ambition! is this the enjoyment of thy treasures? Have my day-hours been spent in enterprise, and my pillow robbed

bed of its halcyon tribute, for tremors of baby-weakness like these? For the eye of my vassal, yon murky corner contains no terrors; for me, it teems with a thousand grisly shades! Besotted trembler! wretched dupe of thy own forbearance! why sleeps this weapon in thy hand with an unspotted hue? Away with the childish dependance to which I have too long been a slave!—Come weal, come wrack, I am indifferent! My fate is wound to a pitch which I can no longer endure. I will not live another night the creature of apprehension. The hour is still; no breath of wind creeps over the woodland-top, to spread abroad the tale of my misdoings! What gigantic form is that which rises from the fixed flooring of my closet, and beckons me to follow? its
huge

huge broad hand is red with blood! Lead on, tremendous shade!—Rowland of Waltham is prepared to attend thee.”

He quitted his chamber, and concealed his sword beneath his cloak, as he passed the servitor, who was now returned to the anti-room. Still the hideous shadow raised by the confusion of his thoughts, seemed to conduct his progress. His mind pointed towards the hall of justice; he slightly deviated from the path, and reposed, for an instant, on a seat in the painted gallery; but the spectre still motioned towards the spot which occupied earl Rowland's deepest wishes. He rose, and, with his sword extended before him, followed the dreadful summons of the imaginary fiend. The phantom stopped at the oaken door of the hall;
it

it then spread its ponderous arms, and melted into the surrounding gloom of early evening.

Earl Rowland placed the key in the time-worn lock of the door, but it was long before he could command resolution to enter. He endeavoured to collect his scattered thoughts, and to reflect on the probable consequences of the act he meditated. But it was not the hour for thought. Wild visions had distempered his fancy; casual interposition had affronted his pride and alarmed his fears. This was an hour in which the good angel appointed to watch his footsteps, whispered admonition to a listless ear; —he flung aside the door, and, after the pause of a minute, entered.

Often had he approached the melancholy hall with intentions as cruel,
though

though violence and bloodshed were not his immediate objects; yet now he lingered at every fresh fall of his foot, and surveyed horrors unknown before, in each recess of the dismal and secluded place. Night had made rapid advances—Already the distance was lost in darkness, and the object but three paces remote would have been obscure to the bold eye of virtue, and was clad in terrific ambiguity for the transient glance of the assassin. Colder than ice were the drops which trickled over his unnerved brow. His sword shook in unison with his enfeebled arm, as he essayed to extend it; and the faint glimmering of the blade was more vivid than the lightning's flash, to his scared eye. He tottered forwards, and the noise of his steps, as he struggled to regain the uncertain firmness of his posture,

posture, seemed the trampling of a host, surrounding him in vengeance! He bent the point of his sword to the floor, and leant on it for support. He looked around; in fancy, he beheld every coat of mail advance from its instalment, and every gauntlet seemed pointed to his breast. "This is most horrible!" said he, faintly. "The dreams of distemper conjure not up such dreadful phantasms! never before was waking man the subject of such fearful thoughts. Recede, marrowless apparitions! I shrink not from my fate! It is the man of blood that bids you to withdraw!"

He rushed desperately forwards, and gained that private door-way through which he had formerly conducted Cuthbert to the midnight terrors of the chapel and its adjacent cells. While struggling to
disengage

disengage the key from his pouch, he ventured to survey the room, and again thought that he beheld the hideous shadow which had been the harbinger of his enterprise. Its features were more distinct, but still they were disproportionate and wild, like the creations of moody frenzy, or the chaotic combinations of dreaming remorse; and, as the phantom trod, he seemed to leave the mark of his foot in blood on every spot he touched. "Terrific companion!" said Rowland, "I am ready!" He lifted the key, but, in the next moment, it fell from his hand, for a scream of distress, and the cry of "murder!" issued from the park, and echoed round the walls of the castle.

Every joint in the earl's frame proclaimed a response to the horrible sound; in an instant the gigantic spectre died
away,

away, and the suits of armour were restored to the cold quiescence of their niches. The earl was sensible of nothing but the wild cry of "murder!" which still seemed to vibrate amid the ramparts.

His hair bristled on his forehead as he listened. Again the hideous cry arose, and the victim called for help, but seemed to call in vain, for his voice grew faint, and, shortly, his cries of distress appeared to be nearly smothered in anguish. The earl noted each degree of misery; he heard the poignant shriek of affright—the supplicating tone of despair—the scream of agony, and fancied that he distinguished the last gurgling groan which parted the spirit from the disfigured body.

The motion was instinctive that led him to regain the door by which he had

entered. He quitted the hall, and, unconscious of all he passed, and all he saw, he rushed into his private chamber.

When he attained recollection, he found the castle enwrapped in profound tranquillity. His attendant was sleeping in the anti-room, and all without doors was so hushed, that the leaf might be heard to fall on the rampart-pavement, from the high elm which had been suffered to take root in the fosse.

The violence of the earl's emotion had restored him to a greater command of mind than he possessed at the period of his entrance to the hall of justice. He was convinced that the distressful cries were not the offspring of imagination; and immediately perceived the necessity of ascertaining the nature of the assault which
had

had been committed within his demesnes. He accordingly descended to the great hall of the castle, and summoning his retainers, first ordered every gate to be secured, and then dispatched several armed parties to examine the different recesses of the park. Meantime, he sat in state, (with hands unwashed from the guilt of his own intentions), to judge the criminal and avenge the fallen.

To the tributary spectators, the earl appeared not more awful in justice than he was placid in integrity. The slight wrinkle of his brow was supposed to express indignation of cruelty; the paleness of his cheek was accounted pity; and ignorance dwelt, with much satisfaction, on the horror he evinced at the whispered tales of murder and mischance which circulated, at intervals, in spite of

his presence, among the panic-stricken attendants. Alas! could these witless hinds have penetrated the deep folds which hid his bosom from their view, how horrible a picture of tremor, distrust, and self-accusation would have stood disclosed! Never did the name of murder meet his ear, but a gaunt and icy hand seemed to strain his heart within its grasp, and he involuntarily threw a glance towards his palm, to see if it were free from the crimson token of intended guilt. Never did the vassals murmur hopes of vengeance, but he shrunk from the sound, and seemed to feel, through every nerve, the blow intended for the object of their abhorrence. They talked of the unseen hand which leads to the murderer's haunt, and threads the mazes of his most artful covert; and he
endured

endured all the horrors of the wretch who beholds the light of day burst on the secret cavern of his retreat, and sinks the captive of ministers of justice.

The eyes of his attendants were too dull to detect these inward workings of earl Rowland's mind; yet conscience rendered him fearful that even the slowest wit might prove too subtle for his disguise; but much it gladdened him to think that his courtly visitants were absent from the hall—a hunting party had engaged sir Everard and his friends, and they were not yet returned.

One long hour of attention and suspense passed, and yet no news arrived from either of the parties dispatched by the earl. Another followed, through which, though bugles were often heard, sounded as signals by the persons employed in search,

no intelligence was received. This may appear singular, as it will be remembered that the cries of distress rose from the immediate neighbourhood of the castle. But the menials, in contempt of the earl's order, first searched the most distant and dreary parts of the park, since they could not possibly believe the direct vicinity of home to be nearly so dangerous to the traveller as those recesses of distance which conveyed an idea of terror to themselves; in addition to which inappropriate mode of examination, the different parties all joined company when they had passed the castle-gate, and moved forward in a phalanx; nor could any circumstance, except the occurrence of woodland, separate man from man throughout the whole of the expedition.

At

At length, the trampling of horses' feet was heard, and the murmur of earnest conversation without the gates proclaimed the arrival of the party. The earl forwarded his page for intelligence; and, such was his eagerness, that a trusty servitor, in the next moment, followed the page. Both returned together, with pale and disordered looks. The earl rose from his chair, through anxiety to gain information.—“ Oh, my lord!” exclaimed the servitor, “ some hapless wretch has indeed been murdered! the bondsmen have made a bier with their pikes, and, as they move the body onwards, the blood trickles to the ground, and stains their garments—so green are the gashes which caused his end.”

The earl shuddered, and resumed his seat.

“ They are here ! ” said the attendants, in a voice of terror ; “ throw open the folding-doors ! ”

The doors were opened, and the mournful train entered, supporting, with care, a body from which the last vestiges of life seemed flown.

“ Are the gates secured ? ” cried the earl, starting from the paroxysm of horror into which he had fallen.

“ They are, my lord,” replied a vassal. “ The last of the train have entered, and they conduct an aged man, whom they found near the spot on which the passenger had fallen.”

The vassals now placed the body on a table, and lifted its arms ; but each hand fell prostrate, with leaden weight, on the blood-stained bier which had sustained the victim. They parted the clotted
locks

locks on the forehead, and wiped the gore from the altered face. So vengeful had been the blows of the assassin, that every endeavour to recognise the murdered man was long fruitless ; at last, on removing the dust and blood which disfigured the lips, several persons exclaimed—"It is Gilbert ! Oh, woful day ! it is Gilbert, who accompanied Sir Cuthbert."

"Gilbert, who waited on sir Cuthbert !" repeated the earl. "Be assured of what you say. Gilbert must be in Spain !"

They examined his attire, and noted every swollen feature ; some doubted—but the majority persisted in the opinion first delivered ; and Gilbert indeed was the hapless traveller who had perished beneath the stroke of malice !

Threats of vengeance were soon re-

doubled on every side, and each eye was directed to the aged man who had been discovered on the spot of assassination. This was no other than Martin, the venerable huntsman of the wood-side, who now stepped forward, and begged to be heard, with tears of terror and distress.

“Give way!” exclaimed the earl. “Old man, advance, and account for the chance which placed you in the hands of my servitors.”

“Most readily, my good lord!” answered he. “Pardon the infirmities of my age;---I am very old, and easily scared! Good, my lord, they call me a man of blood! alas! could these thin feeble hands implant a death’s wound in the breast of a fellow-creature? My nature shudders at the thought of taking life even from a worm!”

“Proceed!”

“ Proceed ! ” cried the Earl ; “ it is your story, and not your arguments, of which we stand in need.”

“ I will be brief, then ; indeed I will ! ” said the old man. “ It is my custom (and has been, ever since I was put aside as incapable of training your lordship’s hawks, and following your hounds,) to walk forth, in an evening, among the shaded alleys which border on my cottage. To-night I was later than usual, and saw that star rise which so often has been my signal for stopping the fox’s earth, while yet I was at a distance from my home. On a sudden, I heard a voice in piteous distress ; and ‘ Murder ! murder ! ’ it cried, till the woods rung with the horrid sound.”

“ I heard it too ! ” said the earl : “ be brief.”

“Anon,” continued he, “I hastened to the spot; but stopped, (for I am old and weak—I could have fought them once!) when I beheld several men on horseback, all armed, and wrapped in deep disguise, assailing one poor traveller; I saw the gashes they cut on his body—I saw the venom with which they struck at his heart; but terror tied my tongue; alas! I was helpless in age. He fell; and while the blood streamed from his wounds, and when yet his wretched limbs were writhing in convulsion, the ruffians dismounted, and rifled him of every thing he possessed. They left him not till he was motionless; and I saw one return, and pin him afresh to the ground, before they all departed. Then I crept forth; I knelt by the body; it was warm, but lifeless. I found it was

Gilbert

Gilbert—I loved Gilbert; he was my dame's foster-child!" (here the old man shed a flood of tears); "and so I fell down by his side. I believe I slept, for I was mainly ignorant of what had passed when I awoke. It was night, and I heard bugles in the beech-coppice above, so I tried to drag the poor bleeding body to my shed; but soon I was surrounded, and conducted, as a criminal, to the hall where I have often tended as a duteous bondsman, in the time of lords who are now cold in the grave."

"Oh, shame on your grey hairs! abandoned monster!" cried the whole vassalry in a breath. "A likely tale to impose on my lord's ear! Your tears show your guilt—hang him, my lord earl! give him to our vengeance! We will soon tear the *murderer* piece-meal!"

"Detested

“Detested miscreants!” exclaimed the earl, starting from his seat. “Vile, rash-judging wretches! who would hang, drown, torture, on suspicion! be silent on the instant, or my resentment shall strike you to atoms! Give you so light a credence to the imputation of blood? Away! dispose of that body, and see that it be decently interred. Old man, you are free. God forbid that we should carelessly affix the brand of murder to any man’s forehead! No, no! depart, old man! and he who dares to scowl as you pass by, had better have been unborn than face me afterwards.”

CHAP.

CHAP. II.

THE events of the evening had been kept entirely secret from Matilda, and she retired to her pillow indulging a fond hope that the ensuing day would break with auspicious omens, and that, before she again retired to feverish slumber, she should have received intelligence of Cuthbert's amended health. The solicitude of her reflections kept her waking till day was nearly ready to dawn. Oppressed by uneasy thought, she then sank to sleep, and did not awake till a much

later hour than that at which she was accustomed to rise. Agatha, and another maiden of the chamber, waited her command for their attendance; and, after whispering a prayer in which her husband's name was many times repeated, she summoned them to her bedside, and with their assistance arose.

Agatha was, at all times, a rigid stickler for the performance of every ritual prescribed by the holy catholic faith. On this morning she was more *serious* and *sober* in her attentions than ordinary. She repeated her Ave Maria, and passed the beads of her rosary, before she applied a hand; in the accustomed services of the hour, to the delicate glowing form of Matilda. She repeated, at full length, the nunnery prayer of her early days; on releasing the luxuriant tresses of her lady's

dy's hair ; and had a distinct mode of intercession ready for every garment which she presented*.

Matilda's pure heart was the most seemly receptacle of simple and genuine piety. She saw the hand of God in every kind and every adverse circumstance of her fortune ; but she observed

* Some readers may, perhaps, feel surprise at this regular distribution of Agatha's orisons. In regard to such, we beg leave to observe, that, under the prevalence of the Roman Catholic system of worship, every devotee in religious houses was instructed to beg a blessing on each garment which she assumed when dressing for the day. Any manual of daily exercise would prove this. Let the little volume printed for the use of the young ladies who were pensioners at the monastery of St. Augustine, at Bruges, be taken as an example, in which we find enumerated the prayers to be used in " putting on your petticoat," in " putting on your night-gown," in " dressing your head," and in " putting on your manteau."

the

the silence (so sedate yet strenuous) preserved by Omnipotence in its lessons to mankind, and she feared to affront the ear of omniscient wisdom by perpetual babbling efforts at communication. More meet she deemed it that, *the heart* rendered an earnest and continual tribute of gratitude and reverence, than that the *tongue* ransacked each vocabulary for the graceful formation of praises which would appear futile when addressed to a being who penetrates the very source of thought.—“Less words, kind Agatha!” said she. “We have implored the Virgin’s presence;—let our actions throughout the day bespeak our further meaning.”

Agatha crossed herself, and curtsied. Her piety was not headstrong! a superior

rior might guide it either to this course or that, at the option of fancy, or at the instigation of interest.

When Matilda was attired, she repaired to the little room devoted to the perusal of her few books; a spot dear to fancy and to memory, for every niche was blended with the idea of Cuthbert. Here she sat down, and read, with an ardent eye and throbbing heart, epistles which Cuthbert had written under the dominion of various feelings. Some spoke love alone; some doubt and fondness mingled in the same line; and others breathed a sentiment of despair, for the writer could not, at the moment, believe that any possible chance would bestow on him the dear delightful privilege of signing himself her husband! She sympathised with the first, she smiled over the

the second, and the last she pressed to her heart, with a sentiment of chastened but exquisite delight.

She had not been long seated in this retired and much-valued room, when three taps were gently stricken on the painted door. The secret wife is the creature of tremor; she started, and hastily hid the letters, before she permitted Agatha to open the door.

There was a little page sojourning at the castle, in attendance on sir Giles Chichester, one of the companions of sir Everard, and he it was that had so lightly tapped on the door, and that now stood boldly forward to crave admittance.

He was one among the most winning and adroit of his brotherhood. He might be (if measured with favour) some three feet seven high; his width no mortal would
think

think of ascertaining, for he was slender as a young poplar, and his arms were scarcely larger than its branches. But no gallant who paced St. Paul's Walk, or paraded at Hampton, was more debonair than he. His doublet was yellow, and he wore peach-coloured brogues; his stockings were watchet-tinted, and his cloak was of murray cloth; his little grey hat was surrounded with a copper edge, and ornamented by a tall white feather, and he bore it beneath his arm with the grace of a practised cavalier. But the prettiness of his person exceeded the beauty of his dress. The down on his cheek was scarcely rivalled by that which was struggling to assume a masculine boldness on his chin. His blush seemed borrowed from some maid's cheek to which he had ventured to press his own.

He

He was a very Psyche in the garb of a modish page.

The fraternity of this pert urchin were authorised to address the fair. They were, indeed, nursed and dandled into alertness by the favour of beauty; and seldom was a page found backward in presuming on the indulgence with which he was received. Matilda had bestowed much notice on young Adolphus. His assumptions amused her melancholy, and his little jocose wiles had often buried a tear of anxiety in the dimple which they awakened on her cheek. The boy, in return, was sedulous as love; and the sanctity of her pillow alone could guard her from his approaches.

He now trod on his toes as he entered the room, and his finger was placed on his lip, while he looked around,

as

as if fearful that spies noted his footsteps, or that vengeance waited to detect him.

“ Ah, Adolphus !” said Matilda, “ is it you who ventured to tap thus boldly on my door ? Little presumer ! you must learn to respect my privacy.”

“ Hush, lady ! Hush, sweet lady !” said the page. “ I have conned a new madrigal for your notice—lend me your ear, and I’ll tell you its name.” He tripped up to her, and holding his hand over his face when it was joined to that of Matilda, he whispered—“ Dispatch *Saint Agatha*—I have a secret for you !”

Matilda coloured in surprise and uncertainty. “ What mean you, Adolphus ?” said she ; “ speak out, child ! you should never deal in secrets.”

“ Oh fie, lady !” cried he. “ Pretend

to

to befriend me, and yet dole out such advice ! *Bone Deus !* I aspire to the mitre, but am sure I should never gain it, if you were my tutoress."

"To the mitre ? Oh, thou unholy bantling, what a thought !" said Agatha.

"I grant you 'twould be a pity," returned he. "My lady Matilda, here, thinks it would be a sin to spread a cardinal's hat over such a face as this, and to incumber such graceful manly limbs with a monk's vestments.—I am, certainly, fitter for the court than the cloister."

"The court ! begone to a village-dame's school-room !" said Matilda.

"Nay, lady !" replied Adolphus ; "you would not say so, had you seen me walk the mall ;—thus I place my left arm on my side, twirling round it my cloak, with an air of grace and indifference known
only

only to myself and the duke of Leinster. With my right hand I manage my embossed tooth-pick, or twiddle my watch-string. And then I swear—oh, if you did but hear me swear!—not a new affidavit comes on the parade but I have it within the hour. Why, lady, 'twas I that introduced gunpowder to the list of expletives—‘Od’s calivers and gunpowder!’ said I; and the duke carried it to the levee in ten minutes!”

“Oh, most gigantic minikin! most tremendous lily!” said Matilda; “drop these warlike airs, or you will affright us.”

“Pardon! pardon!” cried Adolphus, bowing with affected manliness; “I forgot I was in the company of ladies. To topics then more suited to the weakness of your sex. Sometimes I meet my lady

——, or the duchess of ——, (you see I avoid names!) and then I walk up thus! ‘Good-den to your grace,’ say I, holding my watch to my ear. ‘That was a consummate masque given by the cardinal on Thursday;—has your ladyship seen the new interlude at the Friars?’ Finding her reserved, I step up close, as I may do to you, sweet lady Matilda! and, putting my lips thus softly to her ear, I say, in just such a voice, so that no soul can hear except ourselves—‘*Lady Matilda, I have a letter for you!*’

“What?” cried she, starting through surprise.

“Hush!” said Adolphus; “the duchess never speaks so loud.”

Matilda, to whom the word letter conveyed only a single idea, the probability of intelligence from Cuthbert, began
now,

now, in the confusion of the minute, to think that Adolphus was really the bearer of some eventful tidings; and, finding that he was intent on secrecy, she desired her attendant to fetch an embroidery frame from her chamber. As soon as Agatha had departed, Matilda questioned the flippant boy as to the meaning of the words he had addressed to her.

“ Dear lady !” said he, stepping to the door, and listening, till the distant sound of Agatha’s feet proved that she was beyond hearing; “ you have heard of the strange mischance which has filled this horrible old castle with alarm ! I walked forth, this morning, to view the scene of the barbarous deed ; and, as I surveyed the spot, and pryingly examined each bush and brake near the disastrous place, behold ! I espied this sealed packet—the

D 2 superscription

superscription bespeaks the hand for which it was intended ; and I crept and wound, and wound and crept, through every woodland alley and matted passage, till I gained your room. Peruse it at your leisure ; but be quiet as the halcyon when it skims over a lake—there is nothing managed in this world without quiet. I hear St. Agatha—adieu, lady, adieu !” and he hastened from the closet, leaving Matilda bewildered in surprise and consternation.

It was not long before Agatha returned, but, on entering, she perceived Matilda prostrate on the floor, with an open letter in her hand. Agatha uttered no futile womanish cries of distress, much less did she seek to gratify the darling passion curiosity, by examining the scroll which had produced an effect so fearful
on

on the mind of her lady. She directly raised Matilda, and unlaced the robe so lately fastened round her neck, while she chafed her temples, and called on her name in well-chosen terms of sympathy, surprise, and consolation. When Matilda revived, she gazed wildly round, like the wretch starting from a visionary horror, or struggling to gain release from the oppression of the witch-ridden nightmare. Agatha, and every surrounding object, seemed strange and unknown, although she looked, with pointless eagerness, on each. At length the letter met her eye. She started forward, and grasped it in her trembling hand. She tried to decipher the characters, but her eye ran from line to line, incapable of comprehension. "Mine eyes refuse their office," said she, faintly, "and my head

seems bound with a ring of burning iron. Would to God this prove indeed the waking dream of a weak mind!—but take that scroll, and read—your eyes are clear and strong—your bosom free from passion: the figures of the scroll will fail to dazzle your pure sight.”

Agatha readily obeyed. The letter was thus superscribed—“ Deliver this rude token to the hande of the ladie Matilda of Waltham ;” and thus began the burden of its contents:—

“ FAIRE DAUGHTER,

“ St. Ambrose gave spede
to the wearie steps in which I trode to-
wards the couche of Sir Cuthbert. I
found him——”

“ Oh,

“ Oh, woful day ! oh, miserable woman that I am ! ” exclaimed Agatha, stopping at this part of the sentence ; “ I cannot read further ! my heart forbids me ! ” and she covered her face with her hands, as if to conceal the tears which fell in profusion from her eyes.

But Matilda’s cheek was tearless, and no sigh issued from her bosom. She gazed, with the appearance of pallid calmness, on her afflicted confidant. “ Proceed ! ” said she ; “ read on ! ”

Agatha wiped aside her tears, and endeavoured to obey the command.

“ I found him,” she continued, “ reduced to the woful extremitie which is, one daie, doomed to falle on us. Drie your teares, deare childe ! God smiteth not the silken flie, or grovelling worme,

witheout heede and wisdomē!—butte I admonishe with weping eyne!—mine owne harte is bruised, like untoe the rede bente bie a winterly scathe. Lo, alle fleshe is grasse! butte hee sitteth above who hath mercie enow to heale the depeste wondes! Applie too him—his eare is ever open—*Hee* is best abel to imparte consolance, who now chearisheth thie husbande in his owne brest. Grete is the goodnesse of the moste highe! Lett alle mortal sufferers falle downe and worshippe his holie wille!

“ Suffice itt, (for mine hande lacketh power to detaill), thatt I knelt beside his hallowed toome, and tendred a praier for *thie* wellfare! Fare thee well, poore broken rush! If thou wantest further words, the mourninge servitorr of the youthe will readilie afforde them. Angels

gells have thee in their keepinge ! So concludes, thine,

FATHER LAURENCE."

"The servitor of Sir Cuthbert?" cried Matilda, who had listened with a heart of stone to the epistle;—"Oh! and where is he?"

"Murdered! Ill fare!" returned Agatha. "Waylaid by robbers, and slain in the woodland coverts of the park!"

"It is enough!" said Matilda, falling to the floor. "Speak not—stir not! you think I shall weep—no! I can only die!"

CHAP. III.

For many long hours after Matilda was conveyed to her couch, she lay motionless, in the frozen torpor of excessive misery. Nature, in its pity, has ordered the stroke of inordinate affliction to fall with a violence so weightily oppressive that it benumbs the source of feeling, and deadens the nerves which form the mother-soil of agony.

All the friendly balm of this stagnant semblable of ease was now shed on Matilda's pillow ; but it was an opiate that prevailed

prevailed only for a transient season over the power of recollection and the sense of feeling. By degrees, her thoughts collected, and the dead mist of preternatural slumber ceased to enwrap in its kind but sickly arms, the horrors of imagination.

Her mind arose with diminished powers, and each half-born idea was surrounded by the crude prisms of fabulous pageantry. She thought a passing-bell tolled, and that she wandered among long cold aisles in quest of some person to inform her as to the name of the hapless mortal who was sinking in the agonies of death? Then, through the self-same aisles, she saw advance the appalling dignities of sepulture: first came priests and clerks, chanting holy requiems to the soul of the departed;—then she noted

the suspended banners of chosen saints, borne aloft with solemn reverence; an esquire followed, supporting the armorial bearings of the deceased knight. She heard the morrow-masses pronounced with loud and mournful emphasis, and saw the plated door open which led to the dark and melancholy vault. She touched a priest's sleeve, and begged to know the name of the knight on whose obsequies such crowds attended? It was father Laurence who answered; and Cuthbert was the name once borne by the pallid corse about to be interred!

At another moment, she believed that Gilbert, the servitor of her husband, entered her chamber, disguised as a page. He was about to present a letter, when ruffians darted through secret pannels in the wainscot, and pierced his honest bosom

som with a host of blades. They bore his mangled form from the room, but the letter was left behind ; she snatched it from the floor, and saw written, in broad letters of blood—" Matilda, smile no more ! your husband lies low in the cold ground !"

It was amid such frightful circumstances of chimera, that the truth revived in her remembrance ;—but, ah ! all the horrors of distempered fancy were light compared with the appalling features of reality !—mild and comforting was each grim visage called to her pillow-side by the cloudy indistinctness of oppressed reason, when opposed to the bare unaided features of truth !

Her damsels waited on her couch, with amazement and terror in their manner. Agatha alone seemed qualified to whisper

condolence. She essayed the task, and spoke much such words as nature appeared likely to prompt, when a sufferer was to be addressed so very hopeless, agonized, and woe-stricken;—but the sound of her voice was more horrible than a barbed arrow to Matilda's heart! she had not heard Agatha speak since the moment in which she concluded the dreadful letter, and she shrieked in dismay! That moment and all its terrors were returned; every circumstance of fact rose clearly with the sound; she was restored to entire consciousness on the instant, and felt enabled to retrace, with horrible exactness, every line and every letter of which the scroll was composed.

Nature could not withstand further assault. The grisly train who wait on human misery—scalding fever, moody madness,

ness,

ness, and hectic, that dreary fiend, with one cheek hotter than the enraged coal, the other more chill than the ice on the mountain-top ! seized on her heart, and claimed her widowed, though unknown bed, as their own.

Her malady increased in each new minute ; and Agatha, alarmed with the appearance of immediate danger, ventured to enter the room of lady Gilibert. Matilda's zealous and well-meaning aunt hastened to her bedside. Her horror was speechless on beholding the agony of Matilda's face, and on listening to the wild incoherent sentences which burst from her burning lips.

She pressed her struggling hand, and shed big drops of pity on her lovely distempered cheek. " Speak, dear niece ! " cried she, in a voice half-smothered by
distress

distress—"Oh, answer me, my child! and say where is your complaint, and what can we do to give ease to your labouring bosom? I would mortgage crowns to bless you, Matilda! you were ever the foster-child of my heart's dearest hopes. Tell me if the furthest nook of the earth's most distant clime holds the draught that would cool your lip, and the messengers shall be winged who hasten to seek it out."

Alas! it was grief proposed these pointless questions, but it was insanity that answered to them. The lady Gilbert turned to the attendants, and dismissed all, save Agatha. She had noticed the close confidence into which Matilda had received this female, since the death of Frances, and felt assured that the origin of her niece's distemper was not unknown

known to her. Agatha did not shrink from the disclosure, but, first, she exacted the solemn promise of lady Gilibert that the secret tale should not pass farther than her ear ; or that, at any rate, her own name should not be united with the extended narration. Lady Gilibert, like most persons in sorrow, was prodigal of promise. Her feelings, at the moment, were indistinct even to herself ; but it is certain that she did not intend to place more sanctity on the obligation of her promise than is usual with those who make a constrained vow on the pressure of necessity, and submit the ratification of it to the contingencies of convenience.

Her assurance of secrecy was, however, sufficiently strong to induce Agatha to be explicit ; and the lady acquired correct
intelligence

intelligence respecting the extent of Matilda's imprudence, and the nature of the catastrophe which had subdued her mind, and cast her on the bed of phrenzied sickness.

It was not without a shudder of regret and pity, that lady Gilibert heard of the death of Cuthbert. She had known him as a boy ; she had seen the wild simplicity of the child rise into the opening graces of a fair and honourable youth. She had known him as a man ; and had been forced to admire the dignity seated on his brow, and the brave display of his accomplishments, even while she regarded them with abhorrence, as snares too likely to seduce the sensitive affections of her niece. As the betrothed bridegroom of Matilda, she had struggled to circumvent his prospects ; but, *as a husband,*

band, she pitied his end, and heaved one sigh of deep sorrow over his early bier.

“Ah! poor Matilda!” cried she, stooping over the pillow of her unconscious niece; “the hand of ruin has, indeed, been busy about your heart!—so young, and yet so sorrowful! Oh! it was an untimely frost that nipped the blossom of your hopes! Had Cuthbert been noble—had your father sanctioned your wishes;—but whither are my anguished thoughts rambling? Is it the impossibility of the thing that thus reconciles it to my opinion? Oh! to preserve life in this fair casket is now all that is left to kindness, all that remains for hope! Look not on me so wofully, sweet fading mourner!—clasp not your hands thus piteously!—Oh, restrain her! let her not beat her lily bosom! Press her round with soft
bands,

bands, and with a gentle touch, good Agatha ; she must not rise from her pillow. Should I live to dotage, and bend double on a staff as I pace the galleries, never shall I forget the anguish painted on that brow, or the deep tone of the despair which issues from her lips !”

CHAP. IV.

VARIOUS weighty motives induce me to avoid detail in this part of my transcript from the family legend of the Walthams. Were these motives dormant, could I, indeed, believe that a diary of Matilda's pangs, a progressive statement of the fluctuations of that distemper which dimmed the brightest of eyes, and lacerated the gentlest heart that ever mourned over another's sorrow, would afford a pleasing topic of condolence to the modern reader?

Suffice

Suffice it, that, through many days, Matilda seemed strained within the cold oblivious arms of death. The grave appeared already opening beneath her couch ; and it was through pity that her attendants felt prompted to relax their efforts, and to suffer her to sink into the balmy slumber of lasting forgetfulness. But a stronger hand than that guided by human prescience, raised her head from the drooping humility of dissolution. Its warmth revived the tardy functions of her heart, and nature again revelled, in mantling eddies, through her frame, though the spirit still lay weak, oppressed —everything but extinct.

We suppose these tedious weary days of anguish, and all the nights of sleepless horror which succeeded, to be gone. Nature has triumphed over affliction, and
the

the pulse beats with renovated fervor, though its throbs of increasing strength arouse none of those self-diffident thoughts of speechless ecstasy which wait on the first hours of a happier convalescence. Matilda is risen ; her damsels place the softened seat beside the hearth, and the fair ruin, all blanched with the cruel attacks of disease, but lovely even in destruction, like the bent lily after the havoc of an early storm, is conducted to her chair.

Lady Gilibert had been waiting in the gallery for a signal of entrance. Her impatience prevented her from tarrying in her room, and her tenderness incapacitated her for the usefulness of active assistance. She enters—she approaches her niece ;—what are her feelings as she stoops over the form of the mourner,
and

and presses it to her bosom? But the lady Gilibert had too much prudence to give words to her emotion—she counterfeited tranquil pleasure and confident hope. “Look up, dear Matilda!” said she, “and bless the light of the day which returns you to health, and to the arms of your fond and rejoicing relatives. Many are the lips which lift a strain of gratitude on the occurrence of this hour; but none are more zealous, none more heart-felt, than that which I now proffer to the hand that has raised you.”

Matilda heavily lifted her eyes, and looked on her aunt; then returned them to the ground in a listless, pointless semblance of meditation.

“This continued silence,” said lady Gilibert, “is more dreadful than distraction! Matilda! the earl, your father,
(the

(the most seemly welcomer of returning health to an only child), much wishes to approach, and to press you to his bosom. Speak, Matilda! will it not much gladden you to behold the smile with which he blesses his recovered daughter?"

Still all was silence and vacuity.

Alarmed beyond expression by the dismal wofulness of this mute apathy, lady Gilibert determined on immediately ushering the earl to the presence of Matilda, for she believed that no sensation of weakness or surprise could possibly threaten more afflictive consequences to the mourner than a continuance of such marble and fatuitous insensibility.

When lady Gilibert informed the earl that Matilda had risen from her bed, and, though obscure in thought, was much amended in health, he hastened to the

anti-room of her chamber, and, at the moment judged fitting by the lady, he entered. Earl Rowland had witnessed many scenes of woe, with an unaltered complexion; but the sight of his only daughter, pale, motionless, her eyes sunken, and her lips white, quite unmanned him, and, starting back, while his face was convulsed with emotion, he involuntarily exclaimed—"What spectre have you placed on my child's seat? Is this the blooming daughter, full of smiles, and with a blush sweeter than the morn, who knelt to me, scarce a little week ago, and begged my hand to bless her? I *did* spread my palm over her forehead; was it that touch which blighted her thus fearfully?"

Matilda had not spoken for days. In vain she was addressed, in every variety
of

of cadence, by those who tended on her wants. The nerve was still untouched which communicated with the heart: but, when she first heard her father's voice, she started, and hid her eyes with her hand. Every fresh word awakened, for the instant, a new sensation; and, when he drew towards her, she endeavoured to fall at his feet, and embrace his knees. He strained her to his breast, and feebly bade her be of hope, and live to see the sun shine with a more friendly and comforting ray. He expected her to withdraw from his bosom, but she lay inanimate within his pressure; remembrance was gone; the nerve of recollection merely vibrated, and resumed placidity in a few hasty seconds.

“ Oh, lift her !” cried he, “ and speedily ! she presses too heavily on my heart.

Lift her! if she faints, I shall lack power to support her."

The damsels were close at hand, and they immediately raised the suppliant, drooping form of their lady, and replaced her on the chair.

"Matilda!" said the earl, who speedily recovered his fortitude, "you do not speak! let me hear your voice! Behold! the frank hand of a father is joined to your palm. Speak, my child!—methinks I long to hear the harmony of your voice."

Matilda, whose mind appeared to be gradually shaking off the lethargy of thought with which she was afflicted, now made a feeble motion for the attendants to withdraw.

"Recede!" said the earl; "but be within the summons of my slightest foot-fall."

When

When none but the earl and lady Gilbert were nigh, Matilda motioned as if she would take something from her finger. She feebly pressed her father's hand. "Take it!" said she; "and now I know I have your pardon."

"I do not understand you, Matilda," said he; "you have not given me aught."

"Nay! look!" replied Matilda; "indeed, I see it in your hand."

"Be it so, then!" said the earl; "but truly, my child, I wander for comprehension of your meaning."

"And have you it not, in truth?" cried she; "then, I dropped it into his coffin! I have a long story to tell—but you forgive me?"

"My child," said her father, "you ask forgiveness for an air-drawn crime. Beside whose bier is it your fancy
E 3 mourns?"

mourns? and what dropped you, Matilda, into *his* coffin !”

“ *My wedding-ring !*” replied she. “ Oh no ! ’tis here ; and never, never, never will I release it from my hold !”

The earl started. It was, indeed, a ring which she pressed to her bosom ; and there was a method in her mystery which he could not bring himself to treat with unconcern, as the mere shadowy device of a wandering mind.

“ That is, in verity, a ring of gold,” said he, “ which you press with such fervor on your yielding bosom. Tell me, my child, whose hand placed it on your finger ?”

Lady Gilibert now stepped forward, and hid Matilda from the earl, while she endeavoured to secrete the ring. “ Be at peace, my good lord !” cried she ;
“ your

“ your distempered daughter strays over fields created only by her own fancy.— In God’s name, be at peace, and vex not her wavering thoughts ! ”

“ With your fair leave, my lady,” replied earl Rowland, “ I will propose some more brief questions to her. By my father’s soul ! the import of her wildness touches my deepest thoughts ! Speak out, my child ! who tendered thee that token of affection ? ”

“ It came from the grave ! ” answered she ; “ Cuthbert sent it.”

“ And by what right, fair daughter ! did Cuthbert venture on so bold a transmission ? ”

“ He is my husband ! ” said she, sinking backwards, and shedding tears which had long pressed, with an insufferable weight, on her bosom.”

“The fantasy of wildness!” exclaimed lady Gilibert, clasping her hands; “the devious bolt which aims at this quarry, or at that, as madness dictates!”

The earl smiled in disdain. “And think you, my chastened and matron sister!” said he, “that my brain is as a ductile mould of wax, where every hand may impress a signet at its pleasure? No, no! The aversion of Matilda to sir Everard—mine own latter observations—this ring—and the simple but pointed bearing of my daughter’s observations, lead to the truth, though madness distort the path, or art confuse the beacons. Ha! and was it so? Did a hand so white and careless prepare the mine beneath my tottering feet! Burst, fury of the Heavens! my daughter—my only child! is armed against me, and the wildest demons

mons of fate obey her call!—but I will not sink helpless in the tempest! The last relic of a father's authority is still mine—the dreadful privilege of breathing a malediction!—Look down, then, deepest God of Vengeance! and while my quivering lip——”

At the self-same instant, Matilda, on whom reason, in its brightest hue, flashed for a momentary interval, fell prostrate on the earl's neck, while lady Gilibert shrieked, and threw herself on her knees before him, grasping at his arms, which he essayed to extend to heaven in confirmation of his curse. The violence with which he had stamped on the ground, as he dared to implore the presence of the Being in whose right hand only is placed the omnipotence of lasting punishment, was mistaken by the atten-

dant damsels for a signal demanding their entrance, and they rushed to the chamber, and completed the groupe by surrounding the impassioned actors.

The earl's face was black with horror and emotion. He shrunk from Matilda's touch ; the supplication of lady Gilibert he heeded not ; but Matilda sank lifeless on his breast. He would have withdrawn, but her pensile form moved with his own. He looked ; the eye of offence was lustreless ! He seized her arm ; the hand which had erred (indignant father never grasped a fairer !) was drooping, and void of animation.—Was this unresisting being the meet victim of malediction ? Nature turns abhorrent from the curse bestowed on the helpless ! As he gazed on her features, he thought that her countenance assumed the look it had
worn

worn in lisping infancy ;—it was the little tottering child which had so often vainly tried to climb his knees, that reposed, in terrific apathy, on his breast: her infant gambols flitted across his fancy ; he even remembered the laughter which those gambols had full frequently provoked ; and that movement of his arms was involuntary which strained her form to his breast, and those quivering tears were unconscious which stole down his cheek.

Lady Gilibert (watchful as a guardian genius over the fate of Matilda) took advantage of this moment to lead earl Rowland from the chamber of his daughter, and she accompanied him to his closet of private audience. She viewed no necessity for refraining to confess the justice of his apprehensions, since the

little life of Matilda's loves was extinct, and buried, for ever, in the grave of Cuthbert. She, therefore, revealed the leading particulars of the whole story; she watched his emotions as she proceeded, but did not endeavour to interrupt their course. Every female is skilled in the science of the passions, for she is the child of feeling, and her own heart acts as tutor. Lady Gilibert perceived that any word spoken in mitigation, while his anger rioted in its first indignant throbs, would but add fury to the storm which she wished to appease; and she joined in the argument of every execration vented by the earl, taking especial care to point his disdain towards an object flown beyond the reach of anger—the cold and senseless form of Matilda's presumptuous husband.

But

But the rage of the earl needed a more capable subject for declamation ; and he did not scruple to tax the lady herself with an improper connivance at the guilty imprudence of her niece ; and he blamed her, with deep malignancy, for neglecting to apprise him of the perilous confidence which had been bestowed on her. It needed considerable effort for lady Gilibert to conquer the offence she felt on listening to such unmerited reproaches ; but she was willing to submit to any contumely which tended to wear away the anger that must singly fall on the weak suffering head of Matilda, if it did not find vent in the reproach of other objects ;—still she judged it due to her own dignity to explain the motives, and detail the particulars of her conduct. In the course of this disculpatory harangue,

rangue, she informed the earl that she had formerly discovered the mode in which Cuthbert conveyed his letters to her niece, and had contrived to place on the spot dedicated to their correspondence an anonymous epistle, in which she admonished the youth on the score of his guilty presumption, and threatened him with vengeance if he persisted in such injurious and unprincipled endeavours. The earl's policy induced him to listen, with seeming conviction, to her arguments, and he sank into a reverie, during which his brow, however, spoke greater terrors than had before issued from his lips.

Earl Rowland was so thoroughly versed in subterfuge, that he almost suspected design in the open countenance of honesty ;—the deceptive effort, then, must
be

be deep and artful indeed, which entirely evaded his notice. He had been too entirely occupied in the close machinations of his own bosom to have leisure for observing the conduct of his daughter, until the period at which he had determined on unbosoming himself to Cuthbert. The moment in which he surprised his intended confidant in the book-room of Matilda, gave birth to apprehensions respecting the probability of Cuthbert presuming to her affections. He watched his daughter, and was convinced that she did not regard the youth with indifference. This conviction aided other motives in leading him to name Cuthbert as his substitute to the court of Spain. Thus his indignation was more vivid than his surprise, on ascertaining the length

to

to which Matilda had ventured to proceed in disobedience.

Earl Rowland loved his daughter with as much fervor and sincerity as were possible to a mind enslaved by ambition and self-interest; added to this, her existence was essential to the prosecution of his present views; and the forgiveness of the trespass committed by a widowed wife, was certainly much less momentous and trying, than the pardon requested by a disobedient daughter in the garb of a bride:—he readily perceived the impolicy of fomenting a serious breach, at this juncture, between himself and lady Gilibert. The thoughts of machination and interest are quick as the beam of light which penetrates the gloom of a covert; a very few minutes sufficed for reflection.

reflection. He rose from his chair.—
“ Pardon, strict and judicious dame,” said he, “ those thoughtless accents which stray at random from the lips of an aggrieved man. Ah, kind lady! ah, veiled and reverend sister! you know not how this heart has treasured the only child that ever blessed its hopes! Must I not, then, feel bitterly when this solitary blossom betrays a canker at the heart, even while it is grasped within my sheltering hand?—God and his good angels only know what are the throbs of my bosom!—But let the past be gone! Cuthbert, as you truly say (and your noteful heed of the future is evinced by the remark), can trouble us no further. Dead men are mute!—Ha! what noise was that which rose in the distance while I spoke?”

The

The lady looked round with amaze.
“ Mine ear received no sound, kind lord !” answered she.

“ No !” said the earl ; “ then it was a whisper of fancy, conjured from the night-shade by the confused sorrow which reigns within my breast. What was my observation when my reason slumbered ?”

“ You said dead men were mute, my lord.”

“ Ah !” cried the earl, starting ; “ do you heed my words so carefully ?”

“ Respect demands it,” answered dame Gilibert, “ when the earl of Waltham speaks.”

“ You are right,” said the earl ; “ very right ! and I much thank you for your thrifty notice of my opinions. Thus, then, I would continue :—this wild romantic

mantic story of my daughter's imprudence is known chiefly to ourselves: when reason fully returns, her own interest will lead her, perforce, to give the tale no utterance; let us, then, prudent dame, follow her necessary example, and lay a finger of lead upon our lips when this event rises to recollection. Worldlings, in their dotage, think this ear or that may certainly be trusted with impunity; but let us, my careful sister, forbear to whisper such tidings even to the stars!"

"Heaven knows," replied dame Gili-
bert, "it is too heavy a tale to pass my
lip with lightness."

"Be your secret breast of marble!"
exclaimed he; "and then the past may
fail to stain the complexion of the mor-
row with its own contagious hue. My
daughter (thanks to the genius who still
guards

guards her pillow!) is risen from the couch of fanciful oppression; soothing offices, and the balm which time scatters from his wings as he speeds over the mourner's visions, will soon restore her distinctness of mind, and teach her to look only on the future. A father's forgiving smile will best introduce the wishes of Sir Everard. That smile shall be mine; and *his* success will best insure her happiness."

"Your lordship is certainly wise," said Lady Gilibert; "and the peace of your daughter must needs be the aim of your endeavours; but, surely, the wounds of her heart are yet too green;—most truly do I fear that delicacy like hers would, for some time at least, look with——"

"Good sister," interrupted the earl, laying both his hands on hers, "saints
are

are not meet judges of mortal feeling ! St. Austin to speed ! You would not insinuate, my knowing sister, that sir Cuthbert had more than expectation to solace him when he quitted the hand which he had dared to steal ? What ! know we not, then, that a tale of barren girlish love is like the suitor's image reflected in a stream—shadowy while he is present, nothing when he is gone ! Gentle and prudent lady Gilibert, do you but lend your persuasive wisdom to the advancement of my purpose, and the weeds claimed by the presumptuous Cuthbert's bier shall be rejected for garments of white, expressive of peace, and prophetic of joy."

CHAP.

CHAP. V.

THE mind and constitution of youth are elastic and buoyant as the ash on the mountain-top, which bends before every breeze, but resumes its hopes, and flourishes in new blossoms ; while the sturdy majesty of the oak lies forlorn and prostrate on the dependant plain. By gentle degrees, a faint resemblance of the flush of health returned to Matilda's cheek. The fiends who beset her imagination lost their power by day, and only triumphed over the gloomy solitude of her pillow. But dreadful were their visitations at that lone and solemn hour ! It was
then

then that her lost husband rose, pale and bleeding, to her fancy, while his dusty hand drew aside his garment, and revealed his bosom pierced and torn by the weapons of secret murderers. It was then that the cowl dropped from the face of good father Laurence, and his reverend features assumed the glare of sir Everard's look; while Matilda seemed bound on a bed of iron, and was incapable of moving, or of crying for help, though she saw the deceptive friar place poison in the cup, which he termed medicine, and held to the fevered lip of Cuthbert. So wild, so futile, were the mists which preceded the little sleep afforded by her pillow.

But the horror of these visitations lessened on every fresh approach of darkness. She felt more deeply, but mourn-

ed with more distinctness, on the appearance of each new sun. Still her mind was weakened beyond all hope of immediate redress ; she was often subject, for hours, to a dreary confusion of thought. Her wishes were captious and uncertain, yet she gave her desires no words. She was indifferent to all that passed around, and looked with listless unconcern on every fresh spot to which she was conducted by her weeping damsels. All feeling, save that which bled over the remembrance of her husband, seemed frozen within the chill encasement of her heart. Even lady Gilbert spoke in vain—a short monosyllable was all the answer she could obtain ; and this blank and comfortless response more frequently evinced the absence of thought than proved the exercise of it. Hope, indeed, was quite withered in her breast,

breast, and she regarded the world but as a cold and tasteless pageant, which might glitter for a moment to the eye, but which left no impression behind, when the scene was changed, and fresh actors played the allotted part of their hour, with new grimaces, but with an aim as pointless as that of the puppets who preceded them.

Her attendants led her to the gallery, and placed her beside her favourite window. The air no longer blew with freshness on her cheek—the landscape no longer smiled for her eye; a funereal gloom seemed spread even over the verdant face of nature—every thing on which she looked was black; for her *fancy* spread the pall that had surmounted Cuthbert's bier over every surrounding scene, and the deep melancholy of her heart imparted a portion of its own

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gloom to the hue of every face which smiled upon her.

So passed many days of insufferable length; yet some events arose which broke the monotony of her reflections, though only by bestowing susceptibility for novel throbs of misery and woe.

She was seated in the painted gallery, and gazing with a listless eye on those meanders of the park which once had soothed and gratified her through many an anxious hour, when a female, clad in a veil and wimple, with weepers on the wrists of her mantle, appeared at the gallery-end, and was passing to an adjacent passage, but she paused when she beheld Matilda; deeply she sighed, and wiped many tears from her cheeks; then slowly, and with diffidence, approached the spot on which Matilda was seated.

“ Holy

“Holy virgin!” said Agatha, to the damsel beside her, “it is sir Cuthbert’s mother, who has been latterly so often closeted with the earl, that she seems quite to reside in the castle;—our lady must not see her; skreen your mistress, Anna, while I warn the misjudging woman from drawing nigh; here, spread forth your kirtle—extend your lap-mantle;—she seems to list our purpose—be wary, good wench.”

But Agatha’s precautions were vain, for Cuthbert’s mother would not be diverted from her purpose.—“Dear lady! sweet, sorrowing lady!” said she, “permit the humblest of servitors to enter your faded presence. It is many a day since that fair face looked on me with smiles. Ill betide the hour which banished every smile of health from its gentle lip!”

Matilda knew her on the instant. She regarded her with wild energy—"Oh! give me your hand," cried she, "and let me kiss it."

Cuthbert's mother knelt, and pressed that of Matilda to her lips. She was about to speak, when the door opened, and lady Gilibert appeared; the lady started back in surprise and horror—"Oh God!" exclaimed she, "what demon chalked out the path which thou hast trodden? It is many long years since that form met my eyes;—did I not command thee to avoid me for ever?"

The intruder rose in confusion and alarm; but the anger of lady Gilibert restored her to self-possession.

"Surely," said she, "even a dame so haughty and imperious as yourself might pardon the mourner who approaches this
gentle

gentle lady, for the purpose of condolence. Is it dame Gilibert, alone, that does not know the respect due to sickness and sorrow?"

"Leave me!" cried the lady, "while thou art unpierced by the indignation of my glance! Begone! the very sound of that voice was enough to kill my little one. Poor, wailing, unmothered babe, were those fitting arms to cradle thy cold infancy? Begone! my nature shudders at thee! Thou speakest with the emphasis of my child's dying plaint, and thy hands are wet with his unheeded tears. Go to my child's grave, and tremble!—the air is polluted which I breathe in common with thee."

The shivering victim of these taunts unconsciously receded some paces; then she waved her hand in disdain. "It was

thy sick niece, who has ever regarded me with love and pity, that I visited, and not thee, proud shallow-looking dame !” exclaimed she. “ But I am thy mistress ! Look not with impotent scorn ! I view thee, and thy blotted fortunes, through and through. Frown on ! the day may come when thou shalt know me.”

With these words she quitted the gallery ; but no limner could delineate the look which she threw back on lady Gilbert, when she reached the door ;—hatred, malignity, and disdain, were the gentlest features of that look !

On another day, it so happened that Matilda was left in the gallery with only a single attendant. This damsel grew weary with watching, and, at length, slumbered over the instrument, with whose notes she was vainly essaying to
beguile

beguile the deep-rooted grief of her lady. Matilda was unaided and unrestrained. Such a thought now crossed her mind as often arises to the crude fancy of the woe-stricken wretch, wavering in intellect, and the prey of sickly and unsatisfactory wishes. She determined on seeking the spot which was fraught with memorials of a past adventure, and imagined the tears she shed there would ease the weight which pressed so horribly on her heart. With all the sinister sagacity common to the diseased mind, she crept lightly past her slumbering companion, and trod, like a ghost, towards the oratory in which she had once met Cuthbert at dead of night, and under circumstances of sorrow and peril. Her weakened mind pursued the train of ideas which had then induced her footsteps, and she

passed the oratory, and strayed forwards, in similar confusion of thought to that which had formerly misguided her in darkness and apprehension. She did not, however, enter, as before, the passage which led to earl Rowland's chamber, but trod along that which communicated with the hall of justice.

When she gained the large oaken door which opened into this gallery, she stopped. No motive directed her to pause, except the remembrance of having before listened at a door when she missed the oratory, and she recollected (though the idea was confused and pointless,) that momentous circumstances were connected with the words which she then overheard.

She stood like the image of Attention ;
—her finger was held up, her ear dis-
posed

posed to the act of listening, and her right foot was half lifted from the ground, as if fearful that her own tread should intercept a sound. The moments passed, and yet she stood, as if transfixed to marble, in the same attitude. "Still silent!" thought she; "when will the whispers come?" Quick, as the motion of the unspoken words when they shot through her weak mind, wild cries arose!—the vaults echoed with them! and then a noise like the barking of the wild canine wanderer over Arabian sands, who perishes while seeking for a drop to cool his parched tongue! man's creative fancy might shape the sound into a resemblance of the maniac's laughter—but more like was it, in reality, to the convulsive cry of the infuriate animal before noted.

Matilda shrieked and fell. She did not long lie senseless; but, when animation returned, she found herself supported between her father and sir Everard Anhault. Terror stood depicted in the countenance of the earl: sir Everard's face evinced love and surprise alone.

"Tell me," cried the earl, "how came you here?—what thought led? but bear her from the passage. Speak not; there may be others at hand."

When they reached the painted gallery, the earl was renewing his questions; but soon the damsel, who had so perniciously slumbered over her charge, came rushing towards them, and fell at the earl's feet, while she confessed her fault and prayed for pardon.

"Yes," said the earl, with a smile of horror, but without any elevation of
voice,

voice, "such pardon as the traveller awards to the serpent who has stung him. Be gone! quit the castle before the glass drops another scantling of sand. If you linger within these ramparts till the bell knolls the coming hour, my dungeon shall inclose you for ever."

He then summoned the rest of the damsels to his presence, and, after severely chiding them for their remissness, he consigned Matilda to their care—telling them, in repeated terms, (as if it were likely that they should suspect the simplicity of a single affirmation,) that she had not quitted the gallery when he found her, prostrate and oppressed by the thick fancies which had latterly beset her. When he retired, he sent a message requesting the presence of lady Gilibert, and he contrived to entertain the dame

in the hall, until the hour had passed at which he concluded his daughter retired to rest.

Such were the events which disturbed the profoundness of Matilda's melancholy. They were horrible for the time ; for when the mood of fatuity becomes susceptible for an instant, its feelings mock the rational mourner's most acute agony. But they left few added throbs of misery behind—the soil on which mischance fell was too faint to nurture it. Though the progressions were tedious, her mind gradually resumed many of its powers ; and, after the lapse of a few weeks, she acceded to the earnest wishes of lady Gilibert, and returned to most of her accustomed habits. Every thing that partook of *self* was dead in her bosom. She was quite incapable of active thought ;
but,

but, like a docile infant, was grateful for kindness, and would have returned the smiles shed on her by each pitying friend, had not her lip entirely lost the mould in which tenderness and gratitude are wont to form the communication of their feelings.

CHAP.

CHAP. VI.

WITH the returning health of Matilda was accompanied the renewal of her father's projects, and a re-commencement of the assumptions of sir Everard. They were no weak plotters, nor idle and boisterous suitors, with whom Matilda had to cope. The earl well knew that gentleness often effects more than force; and that practice* is more formidable than open arms, in a world where honesty

* Sinister dexterity.

wields

wields a weapon against itself, when the semblance of a virtue unfolds its banner in behalf of the assailants. A command would have been easily spoken, and ordinary minds would have reposed with confidence on its efficacy, when the diseased weakness of Matilda was taken into consideration. But the earl knew that virtue, even in its dregs, is dignified and inflexible. He was capable of appreciating his daughter's heart;—how lamentable that he was not qualified to respect it!

As a first step, earl Rowland requested lady Gilibert to impart to Matilda, by slow degrees, the circumstance of his having gained possession of the secret of her unconsummated nuptials. He commissioned her to detail the presumed particulars of his deep indignation;—she was to enlarge on the horrors of a father's
malediction ;

malediction ; to figure, in exaggerated characters, the tremendous consequences, in this world and the next, inevitably attendant on a curse breathed from the lip of him to whom the victim was indebted for the very germ of life and privilege of breathing. The earl, with truth, relied on the impression which such a picture must make, when presented to the notice of a sufferer so sick, so weak, and apprehensive. Matilda did, indeed, shudder at the view ; and would have willingly laid down the burthen of existence to avoid encountering a much lighter circumstance of horror.

Then, lady Gilibert renewed her ancient theme—the positive merit of filial non-resistance. She painted, in glowing colours, the affection of the earl, the ardour of his hopes, his confidence in the
duteous

duteous inclinations of his daughter; and gently hinted that the only method to wipe away the unseemly tint of a youthful but dangerous error, was contained in a sacrifice of personal feeling at the shrine of offended parental opinion.

It was with much delicacy, and after many distant hints, that she ventured to introduce the name of sir Everard. The sound roused even the stagnant mind of Matilda to such an unexpected emotion of repugnance as shook her frame in agony, and revived the feeling of every nerve which slept in her bosom. Here, for a time, the lady forbore; but she was silent only to renew her endeavours with more heedful and propitious observance. Lady Gilibert was, indeed, earnest in her wishes. The forlorn and pointless apathy

thy in which her niece was plunged, overcame her with distress and apprehension. Any event to raise her from so supine and desponding a couch she judged expedient, even if some circumstances of alloy accompanied the blessing of the remedy. She, likewise, perceived, from the insinulative givings-out of the earl, that a union with sir Everard, (though intelligence respecting the cause she could not distinctly acquire,) was a step necessary to the security and emolument of the house of Waltham. Nor had the knight left her good wishes unassailed. Lady Gilibert was not deficient in vanity, (though pride of person had no connexion with it,) and sir Everard was as apt to profit by the weak side which every character possesses, as he was quick to perceive it. A harmless vanity
was

was lady Gilibert's only consolation ;— she had no connubial endearment—no filial solace ; and this vanity was the step by which sir Everard rose to her good opinion.

Thus, the most retired moments of Matilda were incessantly open to the blandishments of persuasion ; and even the name of sir Everard lost (to a weakened mind) half its horror, when it was continually pronounced by a chaste, maternal, and revered lip. When the earl had thus deliberately paved the way for a personal communication of his wishes, he entered Matilda's apartment, and, after dismissing Agatha, he informed his daughter that he had many words of very dear import to address to her.

“ Ah, Matilda !” said he, putting a handkerchief to his eyes, “ it is a dreadful

ful hour when the parent weeps before the child ! Nature, through every link which unites atom to atom, seems to sympathize with the sorrow of such an hour. Light griefs, where fancy claims a portion, affect gentle minds ; but, sure, fate rides abroad on its tallest war-horse, when men weep !”

Here he sighed deeply, while Matilda pressed his hand to her bosom, as if her heart could impart its feelings to his touch.

“ My child !” continued the earl, “ the heirship and honour of representing our potent house, descended to me as the boon of chance. I was the last to expect such an occurrence ; and, believe me, the velvet which lines my coronet has not proved smooth and easy to my temples. None know the trials of gilded care,

care, but those who are compelled to support it! No spot shines more gaudily, at noon-tide; than the quivering morass; but he struggles for existence who presses the glittering surface! I succeeded to the honours of a house which had a cancer in its deepest covert. The tale of my hereditary perils would be superfluous at the present moment. Suffice it, that trouble thickened around me; and, had not my mind been braced to sufferance, I should have sunk in despair; when, of a sudden, fortune beamed on me—a daughter was born, and Hope lay beside her in the cradle which pillowed her infant head. Ah, Matilda, need I say that daughter was *you*?"

Matilda smiled mournfully, and then wept over her father's hand, while she gazed on it with rueful earnestness.

The

The earl interrupted not the progress of her feelings. He suffered every thought to linger till it had made its full impression, and then he thus resumed speaking:—

“ Oh, my child, you were the gentlest babe that ever nestled to a mother’s full breast, or gladdened a father’s sparkling eye ! Duty and Matilda seemed born in one hour, so wondrous pliant were your tottering days, and so gentle was the dawn of every wish within your bosom ! Oh, what I feel when I look back to the hours of your childhood ! While other wailing bairns must needs be watched with a hundred eyes, and have a hundred hands in attendance, replete with all the gauds which nursery-craft can devise, *you* seemed earnest to whisper peace to your mother’s breast—*you* seemed

seemed eager to murmur comfort to your father's ear! My heart, at this moment, thanks you, Matilda, for the comfort you *did* bestow on my troubled pillow."

"Ah, dearest father!" cried Matilda, falling on the earl's neck, "I now find that joy has not quite lost its tone for my ear. The heavenly thought of giving comfort to a father's pillow revives the fervor of my soul, and I could be content to live for ages."

The earl strained her in his embrace. He appeared to shed tears on her forehead; and, when he replaced her on her chair, he applied his handkerchief to his face, before he resumed discourse.

"Yes, Matilda," continued he, "such was the first bloom of your virtues; and in the emotion of this minute, I see the
maturity

maturity of every excellence which blessed me at its birth. Oh, my child ! it is a father in woe who now sits beside you !—it is the struggling victim whom one hand only can save ! Ah ! should the voice of a parent in sorrow be lifted to such a being as you were in early youth, how gladsome would be the air with which you extended your saving arms, and cried—‘ The heavenly thought of giving comfort to a father’s pillow adds zest to the fervor of my soul ! If for a parent’s welfare, I am content to live for ages ! ’

“ And still, still that feeling beats with undiminished vigour in my heart ! ” exclaimed she. “ Oh, pitying power which guards me ! would I not perish to achieve the salvation of a father’s hopes ? ”

“ Nay, kind child ; nay, dear Matilda, ”

said he, "your own good is mingled with mine. Could I ask my only daughter to perish for my well-doing? Hence, far as from east to west be the idea gone! But, could I see the Matilda of my early hopes revive, and I approached her in dejection, with a bursting heart and a pale cheek, (such, ah, woe the time! as I now wear,) and said.—'Sweet daughter, behold circumstance reverse the ordination of nature! a father comes to beg a dear boon of you; but, still, such a boon as blends your own real benefit with that of his wayward destiny. Shall he lie down before you, the slave of fortune, or will you raise him, and give joy, in turn, to the being who once nurtured your smiles?' Should the father of a past day so speak to the daughter of a

distant hour, what think you, Matilda, she would say?"

"Rise, dearest father; rise, most honoured lord, to all the joy which my feeble hand can bestow," answered Matilda.

"Much such words would issue from her lips, indeed," said the earl; "and could a few short years (haply, those of undeviating tenderness, entire repose, on the father's side,) effect so dreadful an alteration, that the self-same child, when time had raised her stature to a woman's height, and had added feeling to her breast, and blushes to her cheek, should look, with chill indifference, on her parent's fate, and say—'Hence with your secret sufferings! I am indebted to you only for life, food, raiment, and paternal fondness!—tell your tale to a nearer ear;

I am

I am *but* your daughter, so will pursue the fancies of my own bosom?"

"She were a wretch indeed, that could form such ideas, or give utterance to such words!" exclaimed Matilda, falling at his feet. "No, most dear and honoured parent, here I kneel, with all that tender duty active in my breast, which marked my infant hours! I am nothing; or, at best, the willing sacrifice to a father's hope of peace."

"Then sir Everard is my affianced son!" cried the earl; "and you—oh, you! my thrice-told, dearest daughter!"

"Oh, God!" said Matilda, falling to the floor, "is that the price of my obedience? but I have spoken; and will prove myself the child that you so loved in infancy."

From this moment the earl proceeded

as if sir Everard had indeed obtained the full and unbiassed favour of his daughter. The tidings of an approaching marriage were whispered (by some means or other—none of the family knew how,) to those choice mediums of intelligence, the maiden aunt and widowed grandmother of every mansion within two days' journey of Waltham. Conjectures were formed, reports were raised, and many more mysteries were shortly passed from lip to lip, among the only idle part of God's creation, than ever were suspected to exist by either the earl or sir Everard.

Meantime, the vassals caught, with over-strained anxiety, each feather which Rumour dropped from her pinions as she fluttered amid the baronial halls of the adjacent castles. So eager was their grasp, that they received the shadow with
the

the substance ; and lady Gilibert, earl Rowland, and even the gentleman-usher of the Waltham room of state, had each a companion prepared for the altar, according to the marvellous tenor of their brainless whispers.

But soon the servitors of the proud castle of Waltham had more substantial argument for the reports which they were so willing to circulate when no foundation could be ascertained. Orders were, indeed, given, from the earl's room of audience, for the arras to be released from its folds, for the carpets to be suspended over the sideboards, fresh rushes to be prepared for every avenue, and a sufficiency of sweet herbs collected for the purpose of strewing each room of state, as was usual on days of high festival.

There was a licensed *fool* retained in

Waltham castle, (as was the custom in the abodes of the great.) This wretched sport of nature was dwarfish in stature, and disproportioned in limbs; he halted in his gait; one arm was shorter than the other, by the length of a hand; and his head was most flagrantly too large for his short but protuberant body. The busy and the troubled mind naturally incline, with favour, to any object which can amuse the fancy, through a relaxed hour, without a tax on the understanding*. The earl was mightily addicted to the company of this fool,

* That privileged fools were retained in this age, is well known; and the power possessed by such inmates is obvious.—Wolsey, in his trouble, dispatched *a fool* to the king, as his last hope of procuring a restoration to favour.

The strong hold which such jocose companions take on the feelings of those who are engaged, through a ma-
and

and the fool, in return, was every ready with some speech (not unfrequently the more pointless the better,) to attract the notice of his lord. On the mention of sweet herbs, he now stepped forward:—

“Gracious nuncle!” said he, “canst tell me what flowers were strewed over Hero’s grave, who died, forsooth, because her lover was drowned in crossing the big salt water with too hard a name for a fool to recollect, without he bore a book in his pouch?”

“Not I, boy,” returned the earl.

“Sweet marjoram and rue,” said the fool; “the one gave perfume to her

majority of hours, in weighty concerns, or are harrassed by affliction, seems evident from Shakespeare;—when king Lear stands among the wreck of every thing he held precious, he does not forget to say—“And my poor fool hanged too!”

grave, and the other embittered the hand which disturbed it."

"May be so," answered the earl, with indifference.

"But now, nuncle, list ! and summon your wits to your aid, lest a fool prove too hard for you.—Dost know of what the garland was composed which Iphigene's father placed round her neck when he led her to sacrifice ?"

"No, by my troth, fool !" cried the earl, with a look in which anger struggled with derision.

"Gracious nuncle, 'twas all of briars ; —she thought it sweet, for the dew wept on it as she passed along ; but it sorely pricked the hand which touched her neck !"

"An inspired fool, by my holydame !" muttered the earl, as he hastily arose from
his

his seat. "Sirrah, retire!" cried he aloud, "and keep your unmeaning converse for a more leisure moment. Attending servitors, you know my will! The day is but two suns distant on which it is my purpose for the castle-halls to be thrown open. Be each man at his office. I intend the approaching festival to be crowned with the utmost splendor which my castle can command. Yes, yes! hang forth the banners; let the minstrels be ready; the conduits shall run with wine—even thought shall be drowned: wherefore should merry men have license to think? Speak! tell me! Is not every man here prepared to rejoice when I smile? Has not every man an acclamation ready on his lip, when I wave my hand? Who answers me?

"All, all!" shouted the vassals, throwing.

ing their caps upwards. "The festival ! the festival ! we are all ready !"

"Yes, scoundrel hinds !" said the earl ; "and were my funeral-cup the draught which solicited your pledge, each lip would press, with equal eagerness, to the silver brim ! you know not the cause of joy, yet are so well prepared to be joyous ! Is this the fame, this the distinction for which ambition hungers ? —But prepare for the revel : the boards shall be loaded ; the conduits shall inundate the halls ;—eat, drink, rend the welkin with triumph, and meet contempt for the echo. Be the banquet ready when I ordered."

"My lord is mad !" said a vassal, when the earl quitted the hall.

"Lost in hopeless ecstasy !" responded a second ; and then both assisted their

compeers in preparing for a festival which they believed would surpass, in mirth and magnificence, all which had been celebrated in the castle during the term of their servitude.

CHAP. VII.

FROM the hour of her interview with the earl, to the rising of that sun which was destined to shine on her, a second time, as the bride of ill-fortune, veiled in tears, scarcely a word passed Matilda's lip. She looked the frozen counterpart of the image of despair; and those who waited

in her chamber, and continually heeded the expression of her countenance, could not believe that thought actually mantled in her bosom and warmed her heart. But these unpractised observers were mistaken. The lip obstinately mute often conceals a bosom of vivid eloquence ! Through most hours, it is true, a blank and torpid despair benumbed Matilda's mind ; but thoughts would, ever and anon, flash, oh ! how fearful, how poignant, how appalling ! across the black profound of her apathy. They rose to her brain, and pressed, with a touch of fire, on the seat of reason. But she bade them be hushed, with wild and shrinking tremor ; for she felt that, if indulged, they would speedily raise all the brood of madness to surround her with lambent torches of dismay.

When

When keen susceptibility (the lover's joy—the widow's curse,) was once awakened, she struggled to nurse to maturity within her breast a delusive phantom in the garb of heroism. She recollected the face of horror, and deep voice of supplication and woe, with which the earl had appealed to her filial duty. She re-conned the terms in which he had stated the perplexity of his fortunes, and the certain destruction of his peace, unless she extended her hand, and dispelled the storm, and restored comfort to his harrassed pillow. She viewed herself as a wreck, forlorn and heartless! joy had deserted her visions—the colours of life's gay picture were lost to her eye. Was such an unvalued shell of ruined hope to be placed to perish on the solitary strand, when it could be devoted to
the

the preservation of a father? She believed that life was sinking in her bosom; she cherished every indication of approaching death, but thought, that her head would not lie gently on the welcome pillow of the grave, unless her last hours were devoted to the rescue of a parent, whose views she had so fatally opposed, and whose sacred affection she had hitherto treated with too little reverence.

Thus, on the morning which was destined, as she felt persuaded, to quicken the footsteps of the angel of death, she stood forward, like a religious sacrifice, arrayed in the garments of joy, but with every thought adapted to the melancholy of the tomb.

The idiot multitude (all eye and no heart,) gaze on the exterior gauds which
embellish

embellish the procession that waits on such a sacrifice, and believe *that* must needs be joy which wears so glittering an aspect. They rend the sky with acclamations, and would almost seem ready to envy an animal doomed to the priest's knife, on account of the garland which surrounds its neck.

The earl's commands had been most faithfully obeyed. The banner of the Walthams was suspended from the castle-gate, in token of festivity and welcome. Plaited rushes softened the footing of every avenue, and sweet herbs were shed with profusion on the floor of every hall of state. A vast conduit in the quadrangle was filled with wine; and a page, disguised as Bacchus, floated about in a boat, for the purpose of doling out rich draughts to every applicant. Cloth of gold,

gold, and gorgeous pieces of tapestry, were hung along the sides of the chief hall and principal galleries. Many a sounding horn proclaimed the arrival of those gentle knights and simpering dames who had been bidden to the revel. They entered, stiff in embroidery, and decked with neck-chains of pure gold*. Every lady possessed of a white palfrey approached the castle on its back; and each knight was attended by two pages, with love-locks placed in their hair. The Waltham servitors lined the entrance, in the same suits which had been displayed on the entertainment prepared for king Henry; and the gentleman-usher (albeit he ambled in his gait,) seemed two feet

* Chains of gold, suspended from the neck, appear to have been generally worn, both by the men and women, in upper life, on every ceremonious occasion, at this era.

higher

higher than ordinary, while he conducted the visitants to the accustomed hall of reception.

In this hall presided the lady Gilibert, whose countenance evinced sober cheerfulness, rather than bland joy. Her smile of welcome was unquestionable : but it seemed as if a smothered sigh lay concealed behind ;—it was a smile that robbed joy of exuberance, and chided the boisterous laugh which would at intervals prevail.

Still, those who are assembled to be merry, care little for any other purpose during the stay of the vacant hour, and are not to be defrauded of a gibe by the gravest looks ;—laughter was the deity of the day ; and while the comfits and spiced wine were liberally handed to
each

each fresh visitant, many were the sly insinuations and wily jests which accompanied the chalice, and drew bursts of applause from the free thoughtless was-sallers.

At length, a guest, whose consequence demanded attention, if his manners had failed to inspire it, stepped from the gay throng, and, approaching lady Gilibert, saluted her with a low bow.

“Most gentle lady,” said he, “we miss a fair face from this graceful circle. I know not by what name I am to inquire concerning the lady to whom my question points ;—she is the daughter of the gracious earl whose castle now encloses us, and she was wont to shine forth the fairest gem even of a domain so lordly. Vouchsafe to tell us, shall we ever again

see

see the hair of lady Matilda Evelyn stray luxuriantly adown her back* ?”

“ No, indeed !” replied lady Gilibert, smiling ; “ sir Everard Anhault would be much offended if you did.”

“ Lady Matilda, then, is married ?”

“ Sir knight, it is even so !” returned the dame.

And married, in truth, Matilda was ! I forbore to thread the mazes of a path so dreary as that which led her to the altar. The sweetest flowers which art could raise, or industry collect, were scattered in abundance over the pavement of that path, and yet it was hard, cold, and unscented to Matilda ! Faces of gratulation and whispered blessings

* Unmarried females suffered their hair to fall in ringlets over their shoulders : wives did not assume the freedom of disclosing their tresses.

hailed

hailed every footstep; but yet it was joyless and unblessed for her! she seemed treading to a living tomb; and if the chapel's awful roof could have fallen, and crushed her tributary head, without injury to a father's hopes, she would have revelled in the pangs of death, and have hailed the consummation of every whispered blessing in the havoc which destroyed remembrance.

I forbore to thread the mazes of a path so dreary; for what words could paint the wild horror of Matilda's eye, and the phrenzied dismay of her shriek, when she was called to repeat those words in which she had once vowed faith to Cuthbert?

I forbore; for how could I describe, in meet terms, the yet speaking compunction of her soul, even when she lay fainting, on the breast of lady Gilibert, who

who was aided in supporting her by Agatha and the attendant damsels? Never was pen bestowed on mortal hand which could embody the fixed deathlike agony of that look.

The words are all too numerous which tell that she was married. The circumstances are all too painful, even when a glance is the only attention bestowed on them.

When the nuptials of Matilda were thus officially announced, though not a single visitant was made wiser by the intelligence, every tongue acquired the privilege of talking loudly; and my lady of Anhalt, the half-known knight sir Everard, and the gracious father of the mysterious union, (which, it should be noted, all ascribed to the ardent wishes of the bride,) were bandied from lip to lip,

lip, with a gratulatory comment, perforce, attached to the mention of each ; —because the speaker's opinion was delivered in public.

Now the gallants pace the audience-hall, in fond attendance on the beauties of the day. See, walking with an air of distinction among the throng, that tall cavalier, with a short cloak, and trauses of crimson velvet ; his doublet is of yellow satin, and is puckered, stuffed, and distended round his body ; his stocks are of different colours, the one yellow, the other scarlet ; his hat is of crimson velvet, ornamented with a white plume, and he bears it gracefully beneath his arm, while he carelessly applies a pouncet-box to his nose at every break of the discourse. He is the beau of the hour, and the lady beside whom he walks is the
most

most polished and courtly damsel of the party : her kirtle is of ash-coloured cloth of gold, embroidered with strange antics ; in one fold are seen crude imitations of the human form, in all the fantastic postures which morris-dancers are wont to assume ; in another, flowers, birds, and even insects unseemly to the female eye, save when bedight in the gorgeous tints bestowed by the creative loom ; her mantle is decorated with lace of pearls, and her stomacher has a train of buttons (each a jewel) descending to the very peak.

The beau approaches lady Gilibert ; thrice he hems, and thrice his pounet-box salutes his nose, which meets it in disdain. “ My very good lady,” says the beau, “ and matron-hostess, gracious we admit your presence. Od’s dagger-hilts
and

and stiletto-points* ! he had better seek the antipodés than meet me, who says otherwise ! But there is a something, powder and mustachios ! I can't, in fitting terms, say what—but there is a something about *youth*, which leads us to look, with many an anxious glance, for the good minute which is to usher us to the—the—society (grant me the word—it is much in use at court,) of the bridal mistress of this assembly.”

“ If I understand you aright, my lord Eustace Fitzwilliam, baron of Everdale,” returned lady Gilibert, (lengthening the title, with a hope of shaming his foppery,) “ you wish to tender your compliments to the lady Matilda ? the usher even now stands beside me, who an-

* Strange oaths and fanciful expletives were considered marks of prime breeding and of high fashion.

nounces earl Rowland's desire for this goodly company to repair to the hall of banquet."

The lady arose, and every lip was silent on the instant. Each foot trod with lightness; for so active was expectation, that it feared to mar its purpose even by the intervention of a noisy footfall.

The doors of the great hall were thrown open, and the party entered, in due ceremony and rank, preceded by the usher with his silver wand. Bursts of music hailed their entrance, and the minstrels chanted a marriage anthem while they advanced.

On that platform at the farther end of the hall, which was elevated some few steps above the pavement, was spread a table, destined for the most lordly of the guests. It was encumbered with gilded

plate, and ornamented with devices of much shew and delicacy. At the head of this table was seated my lord earl ; sir Everard and the lady Matilda were placed at his right hand ; and bride-maids, clad all in virgin white, and knights-bachelors, the attendants on sir Everard, with love-locks in their hair, were ranged around.

The earl rose, and waved his hand. On this signal the music ceased, and earl Rowland stepped forward :—" Thanks, gentle friends," said he, " for this kind attention. My heart is formed in the model of old English hospitality. I look up, and see the banners of my house streaming over my head. I remember the frank welcome which legends tell us was usual with the barons of an Edward's chivalrous day ; the welcome of that perished spared words—it was the heart which

which spoke ;—be that the orator of the present moment ! Few words, kind visitants, but plenteous cheer : blithe be the carousal of the hour !”

It was thus that the earl wished the banquet to commence ; but strange whispers circulated among the throng. The board waited, but the guests forbore to take their seats ; and such a buzzing pause took place, as may sometimes be noted among a crowd, where a great intent is formed, while no voice has courage to give the general wish utterance.

Every moment increased the embarrassment which prevailed. The earl perceived the drift of the guests, and was oppressed by their silence ;—again he rose :—“ Kind friends,” said he, “ warm and attached neighbours ! it may be that I comprehend the wishes which swell so

silently in your bosoms ;—you wonder that the bride, my fair, my loving daughter, her father's dearest hope ! did not sit in the hall of audience to bid you a smiling welcome, and to receive your gracious benisons ? Ah, my best friends !” continued he, stepping nearer to the company, and addressing that part of the hall in which the most distinguished ladies sat, “ you know not the timid diffidence of my daughter ! she has been bred in 'secret, and fears even that her noon-tide blushes should meet the general eye. Grant her your excuse ! she is the most happy, but most timorous wife, in all king Henry's sea-girt realm.”

Matilda here fell on an attendant's neck, and her convulsive sobs echoed through the hall ; the earl strove to make a noise with his feet, and resumed speaking,

ing, under the hope of preventing the mournful sound from being distinguished. But his attempts were in vain. Her convulsive throbs pierced the ear of every visitant, and gave a new character to the mystery which was known to be connected with the nuptials they were invited to celebrate.

The guests sat down, but the mirth of the hour was damped beyond all possibility of speedy revival. The old shook their heads; the young looked round with whispers of trepidation; each banner, which before had spoken only baronial grandeur, now seemed the harbinger of speechless mystery and woe; the very servitors gazed, in heedless vacancy and untutored surprise, on the silent guests; while the loaded board re-

mained untouched by some, or was tasted with fear by others.

The earl essayed to wear looks of hilarity, and much he strove to instil mirth into his sluggish companions; but an unknown torpor was spread over every breast, and all was dull, spiritless, and mysterious.

“Strike a flourish, trumpets!” cried the earl, starting from his seat. “By Heavens! we seem to droop, in visionary slumber, over our cheer. My cautious guests, the tasters have duly sanctified each dish presented to your liking. What, the good year! we have not suspicion in our halls, I ween?”

“No suspicion, gallant earl!” said an old knight, rising from his seat; “but it appears to us that something (the
bands

bands of Heaven know what !) has spread a strange and unusual darkness over the tables !”

“ A darkness !” cried the earl, while chill tremors ran through his breast ; “ I note no gloom, except——Holy St. Ambrose ! what means the cloud which seems to shut your faces from my view ? Speak, you at a distance ! I see you not ; can I hear your voices ?”

“ Nay !” returned the knight ; “ not so entire is the dimness. Extend your ken, lord Waltham ;—mine eye reaches you.”

Soon the cloud before earl Rowland’s eye seemed dispersed. “ Fill me this measure to the brim with wine !” he cried ; “ I will name a health to the carousers.” He turned to that pale image of what Matilda once had been, which sat

beside him—" *My daughter, gentle friends!*" said he; "may her ancestry hallow the draught which you take to the prosperity of her nuptials!"

At that moment a wild struggling yell of suffocating misery rent the air with its bitter force. The earl's eye was fixed on the spot in an instant; horrible was the object it viewed!—there stood a creature at the bottom of the lowest board, which it were humility to call human; its lips were blue, and drawn from one side of its visage to the other, by convulsive spasms; thick drops issued, without heed, from those frightful disfigured lips, and that ghastly mouth; the hair was matted on the head, and the eye-balls were distended beyond the sockets, as if with ceaseless agony; its attire was loose, yet not ignoble; and its hands

hands seemed black with straining. It lifted one arm ; it appeared to point to Matilda, as she sat, clad in unmeaning white, and surrounded by her scared maidens ; then it burst into a laugh more horrid than the outcry of a fallen angel, and sank backward on the floor.

The earl darted from his seat, and trod with steps of lightning to the spot. He seized the hideous lump of clay, and bore it in his arms from the presence of the terrified wassallers.

Soon he returned ; and, to the surprise of all present, he returned with smiles on his face ; he even affected merriment :—" Oh, admirable !" cried he, placing his hands to his sides, although no laughter shook them ; " my favourite fool, oh, the jocose witling ! met a poor

distraught in the purlieus of the castle, and he must needs—oh, my sides ache to think of the humours of this daring fool! needs usher him to *our* presence! In good sooth, pardon him;—my indulgence has quite spoiled my fool. But the distraught is carefully disposed, and now, my friends, what awaits us but mirth? Fill the goblet high! away with these exhausted devices! Wine, music, mirth, demand our duty; and the merriest of wassallers are we!”

Soon lights were placed in the hall, and wine (the potent talisman!) by quick degrees elevated the spirits of the flippant; but the more grave and heedful departed, when one course of-goblets had passed the board; they saw strange portents in the events of the hour; and
they

they retired, some to consult, others to ruminate, over the surprises which had assailed them.

But the light of head, if not of heart, form the majority of every party ; and when once the transient gloom encouraged by more thoughtful bosoms was dispelled, the earl wanted not companions in the frantic purpose of his mood. Wine soon bestowed brilliance on each suspended banner of the hall ; and the shouts which arose so much resembled those of joy, that the ear of suspicion or of grief alone could tell the one from the other.

But, alas ! sir Everard quitted the board at an early hour ; and for what spot did he quit it ?—For Matilda's chamber !

The earl drowned fancy in wine, and

H 6

the

the revellers drank sweet slumbers to Matilda, with reeling ecstasy.

The morning arose, ere these inordinate wassallers had drained their last bowl; but what was the dismay which prevailed in the castle, when, at the rise of morning, sir Everard was nowhere to be found?

The knight's pages searched every precinct of the vast mansion; but sir Everard's voice did not answer to their summons.

Matilda's maidens roused her, by device and outcries, from the deathlike stupor in which she was plunged.

"Sweet lady! gracious mistress!" said they, when, at length, she appeared restored to life and reason; "it is perilous exigence that impels our boldness;—say, did sir Everard pass the night in this chamber?"

"Oh,

“*Oh, yes!*” exclaimed Matilda, falling on her pillow, and bursting into tears.

CHAP. VIII.

THE confusion throughout the castle increased in each fresh minute; the menials hurried, in pale and gaping throngs, from one end of the mighty building to the other; the places least likely to harbour a quondam knight did not escape their notice; the very cellars were diligently searched, and each suit of armour in the galleries was accurately in-

5 spected,

spected, lest, perchance, the fugitive sir Everard should be hidden behind it.

The surprise now grew so gigantic that reason was unable to accompany conjecture any further; and witchcraft, charms, and magical enchantments were invoked to the aid of wonder; some even went so far as to believe that sir Everard (on whose reserved mysterious manners the vassalry had ever looked with dread and detestation,) was himself a magician in disguise, and that the term of his power having expired when his marriage was consummated, Satan had entered the bed-room and conveyed him away in a clap of thunder.

As soon as this opinion was promulgated, there were not wanting persons ready to depose, on affidavit, that they had heard a noise, shortly after sir Everard

rard retired from the hall, which burst over the castle with the roar of a train of artillery, and which shook that part of the building on which they stood, to the very foundation.

But a more notable fantasy now arose; a conceit so very taking to the privy council of the lower halls, that a deputation of the servitors waited on the earl, for the purpose of communicating it to his ear.

They found earl Rowland recovered from the feverish merriment of the night, and sitting in his private room, the prey of wild, confused, and dejected thoughts.

He raised his head, with haggard earnestness, when the servitors entered.—“Bring you tidings of sir Everard,” cried he, “that you enter my presence thus boldly?”

“My

“ My lord,” said the leader of the band, stroking his chin, and gathering his features into a look of fanciful importance, “ I think we do.”

“ Speak, then,” cried the earl, “ with brevity and plainness.”

“ With both, most honoured lord,” returned the man, “ will I mark my response :—but wherefore comes the expression *I*? it should stand *we*; for many of us laid our heads together before we ventured to approach you. Don’t be angry, my lord; we will be brief and plain.”

“ Is sir Everard found?” exclaimed the earl.

“ Not quite, my lord; not quite entirely found, (as he must needs own, who is intent on speaking *by the card*,) though, I think, we may venture on saying he is all *but* found.”

“ If

“If there is any meaning lodged in that brain,” said the earl, “deliver it with speed.”

“I will ; and a horrid meaning your lordship must own it is ! I presume not to be a very knowing man, but I have had my readings in my time ; and have heard, more often than I have read, that witches and evil-practisers, who devise men’s downfall with unhallowed spells, and use charmed bones and glasses, have prevailed over upright knights, even as stout and valiant as good sir Everard, the sweetest choicest gentleman ! whose winning manners have entranced us all !”

“What idle fancy, Oswald, art thou now presuming to pass as current on my ear ?” said the earl, in a low but commanding tone.

“None, believe me, honoured lord,”
replied

replied he ; “ our suspicions are very far from idle—and they are all true ! My lord, sir Everard is gone ; he seems vanished in a cloud, for he has left no mark of footsteps : man’s arm could not carry him away, for he was six feet high, somewhat heavy of his stature, and a knight most stout and valiant. Well, then, necromancy must have done the deed ; but where is the necromancer ? Under favour, and with due submission, we know we are right when we say it was the horrid figure which appeared at the bridal dinner of yesterday.”

“ The figure of yesterday !” exclaimed the earl, starting from his seat, and grasping the neck of the affrighted servitor ; “ villain ! what would you insinuate ? I know no figure—I saw no figure—I heed not your meaning !”

“ Gramercy !”

“Gramercy!” cried the trembling wretch, sinking on his knees, “I intreat your lordship’s pity! I thought that *you* had borne the shocking spectre from the hall in your arms; and we believed, in verity, that his hideous hand had done the mischief, because none know whither he went, or what became of him.”

When these last words passed Oswald’s lips, the earl released him from his grasp; but still he gazed on him in horror and indignation. “Thou prying eaves-dropping knave!” said he, “go furbish the ewers, and be abject:—and thou must prate, forsooth, concerning the whereabouts of me, and those who banquet in mine halls! Thou? obey, and leave thoughts to thy rulers. My soul sickens over a knave who strives to think without possessing brains! Leave me; and advise

wise thy fellow things who wear my arms embossed on their cloaks, to talk only of my will, and not of my footsteps."

Then entered one of the parties which had been dispatched to make inquiries among the bondsmen whose cottages bordered on the park; their mouths were extended in wonder, and their eyes would seem to tell tales which the lip wanted power to utter. They were accompanied by a peasant, whose face was not less expressive of amazement than their own. This carle was the intended spokesman of the season; and, in reply to the interrogatories of the earl, he deposed that, two hours after midnight, he had quitted the castle, (where he did not scruple to admit, he had indulged in potations, more than pottle-deep, to the health of the lady-heiress and her new-made spouse:)

spouse :) no moon illumined the sky, and casual clouds intercepted even the twinkling of the stars. Whether from the indistinctness of the season, or from the influence of wine (though both, probably, united to produce the effect), he declined saying ; but it did so happen that he missed his path : he strayed to that part of the park from which the monastery raised its awful and majestic head. When first he discovered this sacred pile, he confessed that his courage began to fail ; and, on the knolling of the monastery bell, he fell on his knees, and tried to recollect the prayer named in the calendar as the due of the saint to whom the building was dedicated ; he had twice crossed himself, and had repeated the three first words of the ghostly adjuration, when, of a sudden, marvellous to tell,

tell, but he swore to his accuracy ! he saw a human head rise from the turf which covered the solid ground ! soon, shoulders followed the visage ; and, anon, the whole length of a man at arms stood disclosed, in form as perfect as that of the vassals who now were ranged around him.

But the wonder did not stop here. More heads appeared, and more palpable forms followed. He sank prostrate ; but, even as he fell, his eye was fixed on the apparitions. He described their gestures, and affirmed that ~~they~~ bore, as prisoner, a tall figure, clad in courtly habiliments, who struggled at every step, but who uttered not the slightest sound, either of grief or execration, as he was forced along. The wondering peasant could not discern the progress of the groupe
for

for any considerable distance ; but when he ceased to behold them, the prisoner was still struggling, though all was silent as the night-gloom through which the figures passed.

The preliminary part of this discourse prevented the earl from bestowing much notice on the conclusion ; that sentence which owned the peasant to be inebriated, and that which described the night to be dark, proved quite sufficient to persuade him that the remainder was only a tale fitting to gossips at a wake, or to the sordid wassallers whose board boasts no better cheer than a horn of Candle-mas ale ; still, he demanded intelligence respecting the spot on which these figures had been raised by the besotted peasant's fancy. He was then about to dismiss the informer, but more messen-
gers

gers trod too quickly on the heels of the first party for one to be discarded ere the other loudly petitioned for admittance. The door was opened without an order, so eager were the servitors in pursuit of fresh subject for wonder and alarm ; and food for both was, happily, presented by the persons who now claimed entrance.

The party was headed by a knightly visitor at the castle, who had been in habits of intercourse with sir Everard Anhalt. This honourable guest bore in his hand a blood-stained garment, pierced in seven different places, which he asserted was the same that sir Everard had worn on the preceding day. The knight was breathless from long riding ; he had searched every covert of the park ; and averred that he found the bloody garment on the precise spot which had been
polluted

polluted by the assassination of Gilbert. All present examined the garb. It was defaced by dust, and was so entirely steeped in gore, that the pattern and fashion could with difficulty be ascertained. Many denied that sir Everard had worn such a doublet on the day of festival; but the major part thought the story would sound much better, if the blood-stained clothes of the knight thus mysteriously missing were discovered, and so they swore to the identity of the doublet at a venture.

Thus fresh doubts were thrown on the before wavering complexion of the peasant's tale: not those two figures of the yane which point to east and west could be more dissimilar in situation than the road leading to Martin's cottage, and that by which the monastery was approached.

The spirit of the marvellous gathered strength from investigation; and the menials quitted the earl's room, most pleasingly surcharged with subject for declamation and conjecture, when the hour arrived for them to join the whole assembled band of servitors in the hall of swine-like ease, repletion, and murmured discontent.

When the earl was left in solitude, thought succeeded thought, with more quickness than one wave of the tempest presses on the bosom of another; but, multitudinous as were his reflections, not one of joy was found among the number. The intemperate fervor of the banquet had left every nerve prepared for agony: his large black eyes were buried deep in the sockets; his temples throbbed; and a thousand ghastly woes struggled for expression

pression in his quivering lip, and on his pale cheek.

He summoned the groom who attended in his anti-room ; but, when the servitor approached, earl Rowland gazed as if he beheld the entrance of an uncalled messenger, big with new tidings of import. The groom bowed in obedient readiness ; the earl then struck his head with his hand :—" I believe that I demanded your attendance, good fellow," said he, with a convulsive sigh ; " but heed not the incertitude of my mood ;—the purpose is gone."

The attendant bowed in silence, and withdrew ; but scarcely had he regained the anti-room, when the earl stamped with his foot, and the groom immediately returned :—" Repair to the damsels who tend on the lady Matilda," said he,

“and signify my intent to enter my daughter’s chamber.”

The groom quickly departed; but he had not reached the gallery when the voice of the earl restrained his progress: —“Return!” said the earl; “my will is changed; or, rather, go proffer inquiries concerning the lady Matilda’s health, and assure her of my anxious wishes for her welfare.”

The messenger had not long departed, when a little page, retained by my lady Gilibert, requested entrance, and informed earl Rowland that the dame much wished some minutes’ converse with him, and would, with his good leave, repair, for that purpose, to his room of retirement.

The earl started, in a violence of dismay not readily comprehensible, on receiving

ceiving this intelligence:—"Keep her away!" cried he; "your office is expert—forbid her to approach me! say that I am marvellously indisposed!—say anything! little fabling tongues like yours never want feigned mysteries." This earl Rowland uttered while subject to diseased confusion of thought, and under the impulse of the first momentary throbs of surprise; but, in a few instants, he drew up his stature to all the proud height of manly grandeur:—"Go, child," said he, in a voice of calm authority, "and inform the lady Gilibert that it does not, at present, suit my convenience to admit her."

He struck his forehead with his clenched hand, when left again alone:—" 'Sdeath!" cried he, "was this painted effigy of a puissant baron ever the sensi-

ble and feeling form of Rowland earl of Waltham? Is that good weapon which hangs suspended on the room's side, the faulchion with which I once cleaved the traitor's skull who dared to whisper treason against the dignity of my house? Vile, shivering, and incapable dotard! What! descend to curtain-whispers with the slave who lives only on the breath of my authority? Let me creep to some murky den, where nothing speaks of the lost hardihood of my temper, or the faded grandeur of my name, lest the very banners fall on me as I pass, and crush my unmanned frame! Oh! I have grasped, in my airy wanderings, at a sword of vast renown and high authority, but the gilded handle only is mine;—the steel has no point—no edge; the blade is powerless!”

CHAP.

CHAP. IX.

THE most minute and anxious researches of the castle-inmates proved incapable of penetrating the mystery which hung over the fate of sir Everard. Careful scouts traversed every recess of the surrounding country. Curiosity was joined with duty, and no nook was left unexamined that was likely to conceal him—no being left unquestioned, who was thought capable of conveying information. At length, most of those concerned in the circumstances of the knight

thus strangely missing, contented themselves with believing that he was certainly murdered ; and, wearied by the exercise of their own wonder, they very wisely left it to Providence, and a future day, to explain the mode in which the horrid deed had been committed.

With such ductility could those who thought lightly on the subjects of sir Everard and his concerns, reflect on his probable murder and certain disappearance ;—but Matilda, the weeping widow of Cuthbert, the self-detested wife of his mysterious rival—what were her reflections on the speechless horror of the few last days ?

On retiring from the hall, on the night of her nuptials, Matilda entered her chamber with looks of marble apathy. Lady Gilibert, and the female pageants,
clad

clad in white, who had attended the ceremonies of the day, quitted her at the door, and Agatha, with the damsel next her in consequence, remained to perform the services of the hour; they soothed her misery, and idly strove to call smiles to her cold lip: so little able is a vulgar fancy to appreciate the feelings of the exalted breast! She fell on her knees before the crucifix which stood between two waxen night-lights, on the sculptured table. She seemed to breathe orisons; but her look was not elevated, and her lips were motionless.

When she arose, Agatha approached, and loosened the chaplet which had so deceptively ornamented her brow with the white semblance of peace and joy; the other attendant, likewise, proffered her services, but Matilda waved her hand,

with an eloquent look of mingled disdain and despair, which forbade their interference.

“ Sweet lady,” said Agatha, “ you were not wont to repay our nightly attentions with such chill looks. Let grief be banished from the fairest face over which it ever spread its unseemly hand ! This hallowed apartment assumes a gay air for the celebration of such an eve ; oh ! let not your smiles be wanting to complete its embellishment !”

Matilda looked round, and perceived that costly decorations had, indeed, been disposed throughout her room, since she quitted it in the morning. New mirrors were fastened on the walls ; rich carpets were placed before the ebony tables ; and the bed was one on which her lovely form had never rested—this bed was embroidered

broidered with gorgeous magnificence; tassels of silver hung from each carved cornice, and the pillows were trimmed with a profusion of delicate lace. Cold horror streamed through her heart as she surveyed these mournful embellishments. Such vacant woful delirium as had once enslaved her, again stood expressed in her eyes:—"Hark!" said she, gently touching the arm of Agatha; "I hear his voice, creeping in whispers through the sod which presses on his clay-cold breast! Yes, love! I hear your low hoarse voice. Shake off the crumbling earth;—here I am, gentle love! but tread with a hushed footstep! I will wait for you, as patient as the marble statue which wears the same attitude for ages. Agatha," continued she, in a low but stern tone, "dismiss this busy prying

maiden ;—she is not privy to our secret, and must not see my love when he enters ; she will tell that the dew of the grave dripped from his hair, and that will betray us on the instant.”

“ Sweet lady, be pacified !” said Agatha ; “ meet it is that even the icy hand of sorrow or regret should freeze the burning agony of thoughts like these.”

“ You are right !” said Matilda ; “ it would, indeed, be unseemly to admit him with an unencircled finger. Be quiet ;—we will order every thing with suited reverence.”

She hurried to her cabinet, and took thence the ring—the wedding-ring which Cuthbert, in a woful minute, had pressed on her yielding hand !

“ Now,” said she, “ we are prepared ; but, God soften my pillow with his forgiveness !”

giveness ! My heart seems hot with pain, and yet how cold is the shudder which runs through it ! Ah, that figure !—it is my mother, and she forbids the rites. Oh ! pardon, pardon, pardon !” cried she, falling on the bed, and bursting into tears.

Agatha hastened to the bedside ; she took Matilda’s hand :—“ Those tears have eased your heart, kind lady,” said this sedulous attendant ; “ now let Marian and myself prepare you for repose.”

“ What would you do ?” cried she ; “ did I not tell you that the rites are forbidden ?—Quit me !”

“ Alas ! gentle mistress,” said Agatha, “ you wander !”

“ Ah, no !” returned Matilda, pressing her hands to her side, “ I am fixed and hopeless ;—I cannot wander !”

“ Your

“Your pillow will speak peace,” said Agatha; “let me undo this bracelet.”

“Quit me, on your duty!” replied Matilda: “I will but pray, and then seek repose.”

There was so much of command mingled with the wildness of this last speech, that Agatha did not venture on disobedience, and Matilda was left alone in her chamber.

It was not sleep, but a deathlike torpor, that mocked the very pulsations of existence, from which Matilda was aroused, on the succeeding morning, by the maidens who entered her room to proffer inquiries concerning Sir Everard. When relieved from the pressure of this wild and unusual stagnation by the devices of her damsels, she gradually attained power to retrace, with some faint

faint hints at correctness, those transactions of the preceding eve which still seemed all shadowy, disfigured, and incomprehensible. She remembered that when forsaken by Agatha, she had sunk on her embellished couch, in a strange yet breathing dearth of consciousness and idea. She believed that she had called wildly on Cuthbert, and had fancied that he glided from the grave at her summons ; she thought she had heard a hundred footsteps pace round her bed ; that then she fainted—but was cruelly aroused from the friendly oblivion of entire stupor by the daring advance of some one to her couch. All else was confusion, dismay—was every thing but visionary !

At what time the prophaner of her repose quitted the room, Matilda was en-

tirely ignorant. She knew too much in knowing that her repose had been interrupted.

•CHAP. X.

WHEN Duty seems to triumph over Nature, of what does her fallacious conquest consist? The tear she may repel—the sigh she may suppress—the hand lead whither her stern laws require; but the heart remains inflexible; and so per-
versely is the heart constituted, that every effort on the part of the sacrifice
does

does but augment the force of the objectionable passion.

Matilda had devoted herself to the supposed preservation of her father. She had received sir Everard as a husband, and she laboured to regard him with the reverence due to the man who possessed a religious right to her bosom and all its affections; yet, in spite of every effort, she regarded him with abhorrence: she shuddered to think him murdered; yet, could she have looked on the naked lineaments of her own heart, she would have shuddered with still more horror to believe him living. His absence she contemplated with unchastized joy. She felt that his conscious look would have pierced her heart. His presence and enforced privileges it was worse than death only to apprehend.

Matilda's

Matilda's hours chiefly wore away in drooping and dejected solitude ; she had even dismissed Agatha from her presence. So sickly were the fancies of her bosom, that she united the air, the voice, the look of Agatha with the terrors of her nuptial night, and her appearance was the signal for bursts of indescribable agony.

Sometimes she saw her father ; and, through the hours which she passed with him, her mind became sensible of a sentiment of enthusiasm which chased away the most severe of her cares. When she pressed his hand, she triumphed in the performance of a duty ; and sweet were the tears of tenderness which she shed on it.

The lady Gilibert, too, she sometimes admitted ; yet the voice of her aunt
sounded

sounded with harshness to her fancy ;— it was the voice which had recommended the suit of sir Everard, and every tone was the memorial of a thought of woe.

She flew from all society, and nursed, with sedulous fondness, the misery which was consuming her heart ; but through no *night*, though the most garish lights illumined the chamber, could she submit to be alone. Two maidens had couches placed beside her sorrowing bed, and often did she break their deep and careless sleep, to call for the comfort of their voices, that she might be assured she was not, indeed, exposed to nightly solitude and its dangers.

The maidens repined not at any trespass on their free slumbers ; and, sometimes, they warbled melancholy ballads, or told such fantastic and wondrous tales as
nunnery

nunnery boarding-rooms afford, to lull her cares, and sooth her into a short and healing repose.

But even Matilda's present affliction was comparative peace to that which she was destined to endure. She wept as Cuthbert's widow; she loathed existence as sir Everard's wife; and thought it impossible that she could feel more deeply:—But a new pang was in reserve—a trial so severe, that nature shuddered through every nerve when first its force assailed her. Had Cuthbert lived—had Cuthbert claimed the privileges annexed to the bridal ring which he placed, with so much anxious fondness, on her finger, what new, what exquisite throbs of tenderness would have vibrated in her bosom, when she found it likely that an innocent and sanctified love would soon
gather

gather fresh graces from the dimpled cheek of its smiling offspring !

But when Matilda found life struggling for a new creation within her bosom, and believed that she could never regard the father of her babe with any other than feelings of deep and shuddering repugnance, nature itself grew hideous to her eye, and, in the rashness of her early phrenzy, she even dared to murmur at the operation of that law which Nature intended as the prime blessing of her choicest work.

She shut herself in darkness, and restrained, for several days, from needful food. In the bitterness of her misery, she fell on her knees, and wildly called on the God of nature to arrest the progress of her existence !—even a wish so wild issued from the innocent, the gentle

gentle lips of Matilda ! *Once* (when a conscious blush of hidden tenderness was the most poignant emotion which she knew) she would have trembled to behold the wretch whose breast could form so desperate, so presumptuous a notion ! . Could she have believed that the dormant feelings of her own bosom would ever be propelled to the utterance of such an aspiration, the rose, even while in its bud, would have faded on her cheek, and she could have gazed on the scorpion brow of Médusa with less terror than on the soft features reflected by her own mirror ! Thus we are all the creatures of circumstance ; and, sure, the instance of Matilda should teach us to regard, with gentleness, the errors and imbecility of every sufferer, whose conduct is objectionable, when exposed to trials
which,

which, happily, ourselves have hitherto been enabled to avoid.

But soon Matilda rose from her knees; her lips trembled in pale horror when she recollected the petition which she had dared to lift to the being who sheltered *her* while yet the light was unseen, and while she reposed, without the power of breathing, in the bosom of her mother. Her hands, which she had extended towards Heaven, seemed tinged with that appalling hue, whose stain whole oceans could not wash away, when it stands impressed on the palm of the murderess; her mother's nurturing frame seemed to start, in reanimation, from the ponderous enclosure of the tomb; she saw the breast which had sustained her infancy—she felt the hand which had pil-
lowed her head, when the flimsy rush
would

would have been a weapon of danger to her baby texture. While fancy presented this spectre to her view, Matilda felt as if her sex stood disgraced in her own degenerate bosom—as if the parent who had borne her, cast her from remembrance, like a foul blot to the name of woman, and a monstrous prodigy, which no mother could own without a burning blush of shame.

Again she fell on her trembling knees. —“ Pardon !” she exclaimed, “ oh, pardon, just God of the helpless babe and tottering infant !—send thy dread ministers to search my bosom, and be a curse entailed on that portion which is void of the germ that raises the mother’s fondness—the parent’s protection ! Oh ! I have been too rash ; and nature heaves indignant within my panting breast at
the

the remembrance :—no; I will nurse my person as I should watch over the untold wants of a petal babe! each sigh shall be smothered, as sacrilege against my infant's unborn welfare. Yet, forgive me," she cried, while heavy tears rolled down her cold cheek; "forgive me, God of cradled innocence! if my eye turns, with compunctious loathing, from the smiles of the forlorn which I nurture! Extend not my punishment to the unoffending forehead of my child, if all a mother's doating fondness fail to accompany maternal duty! I will live, though affliction exhaust its bitterest vials on my destiny, while life can impart protection to my unconscious offspring; but I feel, too deeply I feel, that I must turn, with anguish, even from the sweetest smile

with which my babe can woo me to its sustenance."

The manner of Matilda's life was now entirely changed; no longer she sat, with pointless gaze, and hands folded on her bosom, in the lone melancholy of her chamber. Solitude she avoided as her direst foe, and courted those airy blandishments which, even in her earlier days, she had regarded with indifference. She assembled occasional parties from the nearest mansions, and would have more frequently indulged in festive and hospitable ceremony, had not the growing melancholy of the earl thrown an oppressive damp over the conviviality of the halls. Lady Gilibert was, now, a frequent inmate of her niece's room; and the pleasure of her good heart, on beholding

holding the change in Matilda's deportment, was unspeakably vivid ;—she even rejoiced over the occasion, though she did not dare to communicate to Matilda the cordial satisfaction with which she contemplated the probability of an heir appearing to the Waltham title and revenues, while such a cloud of mystery and woe attended the important birth. On the bosom of her aunt, Matilda now relied with entire confidence, and drew comfort and support from the communication : she had, now, no secret to conceal—she had, now, no hope for prudence and reverend coolness to gainsay ; all she had to tell was sorrow—all she wished to hear was pity !—and pity did issue, in its gentlest tones, from the kind lip of her aunt, blended with whispers of condolence, and cherishing suggestions

of peace and resignation. Lady Gilbert's arguments (and much it gratified the dame's self-esteem to note the circumstance) were now received with an obedient ear, for the wishes of her audientress moved in unison with her own judgment. Never had she loved Matilda with such entire fondness; and she was the more intent on extracting good from the seeming adversity of all that had occurred, because she felt that she had taken an active share in producing the events which had roused her niece from reckless and lamentable apathy.

Another visitant, at this period, entered Matilda's room; and though her entrance was imprudent, Matilda had not power to command her to withdraw unheard;—this was the mother of Cuthbert, whose sojournments at the castle appeared

to keep pace, in frequency and continuance, with the advance of earl Rowland's distempered melancholy. This woman, without consideration, or influenced by some unknown motive, now approached Matilda, and even ventured to mention the name of the lamented Cuthbert.

The sight of this female restored to Matilda's eye, in all its woful strength of colouring, that tremendous picture over which she had latterly studied to preserve a constant veil; but the name of her husband—of the noble, the hapless being whose image was treasured in her deepest heart, with sculpture of inimitable value, though so much terror was blended with the grace of the features, that she did not dare to contemplate them, even when lifting her orisons;—

this name struck on the most sensitive chord of her bosom, and involuntary tears proclaimed the idolatry with which she regarded Cuthbert's remembrance.

"Alas!" said the mother, "I repent me of my boldness: these tears—this agitation;—we are alone!—these emotions, dear lady, confirm the tidings which, more than once, have met my ear.—You loved my son!" cried she, falling at Matilda's feet, and seeming to weep on her hands.

"Oh, forbear!" replied Matilda, "nor trespass farther on my weakness. Loved him! oh, Heaven! what eye could regard him with indifference?"

The tears of the mother increased.—
"He was, indeed," said she, "the brightest among the youth of promise. So much grace, and so much gentle courage,

rage, never gladdened the eye of doating parent ! Methinks I see his ardent smile shine before me, at this instant ! I see the elegance with which he trod the hall, the fresh and blooming beauty of his face, as he joined in the perilous sports of the field.—Oh ! his voice, so full, yet still so tender, sounds in my ear !—I feel the softened touch——”

“ Forbear !” exclaimed Matilda, falling, all lost in tears, on the mother’s neck ; “ your son—your son—was my husband !”

Matilda felt the frame which supported her tremble in convulsive agony. She looked, and saw the face of Cuthbert’s mother blackened with emotion ; cold drops stood on her forehead, and every muscle was strained in speechless energy.

“ Be more tranquil !” said Matilda ;

“ my hopes and heart are broken. I cannot bear the sight of such wild agony.”

When the wretched mother regained power of utterance, she hastily resumed a seat, and hid her face with her hands, while she exclaimed—“ Oh, speak again, that I may be assured I listened to no vision !—Did you say, lady, that Cuthbert was your husband ?”

“ Most truly !” said Matilda; “ but the minute which united our hands separated our fates for ever. Oh, Cuthbert ! this is, haply, the last time your beloved name will ever pass my lips. Pardon, great God ! the fervor with which I lament the possessor of my heart, while my lip has vowed duty to another at thy altar ! Oh, Cuthbert, farewell for ever !”

Her companion had now recovered from the excess of agitation, yet she
looked

looked round with a wild confusion of countenance. She fixed her eyes on Matilda, with the eagerness of mingled terror and hatred.—“ You parted in the moment of your nuptials ? ” said she, in a hurried voice.

“ We did,” answered Matilda, with tears.—“ Disturb not, farther, the hallowed ashes of my remembrance.”

“ I will not,” said the mother of Cuthbert ; “ meet it is that they indeed repose for ever. Could I have thought—but it is gone ! and Cuthbert to presume—but it is past ! Death averts all !—Oh, ruined and offenceless lady ! be assured there is a place left in my heart which can feel for thee—can yield thee pure pity. Behold, I weep !—mine eyes are not used to weeping, yet your fate com-

pels a tear. Adieu ! may you be spared for happier days !”

Such were the words with which she quitted the room. There was a peculiarity in her manner which chilled Matilda while she listened ; even the tender wish she breathed at parting, was comfortless on her lip. Matilda involuntarily shuddered ; and, before she retired to her oratory, for the purpose of opening her heart to the blessed Virgin, she commanded her damsels to proffer an excuse, should Cuthbert’s mother again request admittance.

CHAP.

CHAP. XI.

THE cloud which had been long gathering round earl Rowland's pillow grew more heavy and oppressive at each fresh rising of the sun. Earl Rowland was a man who knew the good, though he practised the bad ; his heart was susceptible, though his actions were obdurate : such is, not unfrequently, the triumph of fortune over nature.

The man who pushes boldly forward on a troubled sea, with no pilot but ambition—no ballast but intrepidity, does

not perceive the perils of his voyage, till he has quite lost sight of the peaceful haven which his rashness once disdained. Confounded with the tumult of the waters, and the view of the horrible profound expanded before him, he then sickens over his undertaking, and strives, with many a heart-wearing sigh, to guide his frail and presumptuous bark to the nearest friendly shore. But his efforts are vain ; he is doomed to a perpetual contest with the tempests of the vast abyss which lies in perspective, or he perishes amid the mazy shoals of the coast to which he steers for succour.

Such appeared earl Rowland's fate. Fresh intricacies beset every new step. Each hand at which he grasped for assistance receded from his touch ; and he was left alone, to encounter all the seve-

city of the perils which his own temerity had induced.

His mind and body both sank beneath the trial, and he was condemned to the most dreadful of all sick pallets—that which vain remorse renders harder than a bed of steel, and from which suspicion banishes the fairy smiles of hope and condolence.

It was now that his widowed sister's wishes might be supposed healing to his distempered thoughts; but the earl most perversely declined all communication with dame Gilibert, and, to the surprise of most within the castle, he chose Cuthbert's mother for his confidential solace. This female, in consequence of the earl's desire, now resided entirely at Waltham. Twice in each day she attended in the earl's sick room. None waited at these conferences,

conferences, though they frequently lasted for a considerable time.

I have said that the dependants were much surprised at this circumstance; but lady Gilibert was offended beyond all hope of forgiveness. She regarded the earl's actions with so much amazement and detestation, that she would have quitted the castle, in open disgust, had not the situation of Matilda demanded, at this time, the most zealous of her attentions.

The hour was now constantly expected in which Matilda would usher to the busy stage of the world a new child of trouble, destined, *indeed*, to be baptized in the drops of woe which fell down its mother's cheek! Every feeble ailment which preceded this season of trial, Matilda bore with heroical indifference. It was for a
being

being dependant on her that she suffered—and what ailment could then be too mighty for her fortitude?

As the minute drew nigh, the anxiety of dame Gilibert, perhaps, exceeded that of her niece. The good lady viewed, singly and with distinctness, each circumstance of misery which added to the perils of Matilda's bed; and she trembled for the welfare of her niece, as she contemplated the picture. In such an hour, when wild apprehension, and the fear of death in a thousand frightful disfigured forms, appal the weakened mind of suffering tenderness, there is but one voice which can whisper efficient consolation;—alas! this voice could not sound to Matilda's ear. When anguish visits the human frame, in its most distressful shape, and the trembling hand is extended
for

for help and consolation, hope steals to the mourning heart, and soothes present sorrow with delicious images respecting the future. The affrighted wife pictures the transport with which she shall present, when trial is no more, and a gentle lassitude comforts drooping nature, the pledge of past and the promise of future tenderness to the object who shared her fears, and whose joy is more precious even than her own. But was this the lot of Matilda? Oh, painful reverse! dreadful is the feeling of the bereaved wife, who is doomed to shew her child a husband's grave, when it learns to lisp the name of father; but even *her* pang was light if balanced with that which rent Matilda's breast. She had no consolation but that of duty; and, sure, there are moments of mortal woe which
demand

demand the touch of a still gentler comforter !

The hour arrived, and Matilda lived. I stop not to describe the zeal with which lady Gilibert fell on her knees before a statue of St. Editha, and poured forth her heart, in well-intended thanks, to the beatified matron whose hand, she was persuaded, had shielded her niece through every suffering minute. I stop not to detail the admiration of the gossips, who vowed by their holy dame, and called St. Bridget to witness the veracity of the vow, that so gracious a child had never blessed their sight since first it was their custom to gratulate the mother of a newborn babe ! Nor pause I to describe the eager glances of the attendant maidens, who peered each over the shoulder of
the

the other, anxious to catch a peep, as if, I ween, a little bairn were a prodigy in this breathing world! More meet I deem it to attend the mother, as she lies, all faint and terrified, on her exhausted couch.

After Matilda had whispered a strain of gratitude to *his* awful yet tender arm who guards the weak and sustains the sufferer, she exclaimed, with faint but eloquent eagerness—"Tell me, you who are nearest, is my child—oh! is it—a girl?"

"A boy!" returned lady Gilibert; "a beauteous boy, who already looks a promise of blessing his mother through every hour which anxiety might otherwise call its own."

"A boy!" repeated Matilda, feebly
starting;

starting ; “ then I am wretched indeed !
—but angels weep gentleness on his forehead ! ”

The attendants presented the child to its youthful mother ; but she averted her head, and covered her eyes with her faint hands.—“ Retire ! ” said she ; “ I did not bid you approach—I will gather courage—Oh, wretched mother !—I cannot yet look on mine own offspring ! ”

Now the babe wailed. Matilda’s ear was bent forward to catch the sound. It was the feeble plaint, the low half-living cry for succour, of the child of her own bosom:—“ Bring it near ! ” said she. “ It cries for help;—you are too ungentle.—It lacks the softness of my arm.”

When she was more entirely restored, the nurses brought the child, and offered it to her embrace. Again she shuddered,
and

and waved her hand in a repulsive manner, but never touched the arm which presented the infant to her notice. The nurse moved her helpless burthen forward. When Matilda felt the little limbs of the babe, she half-strained it to her side ; but then repugnantly withdrew from the unoffending blossom. The little one seemed to look in her face, and nestled, with its mouth, towards her bosom.—“ Oh, my child !” cried Matilda, gently pressing it to her breast ; “ I feel that I am your mother ! Come to my heart ; and ever banished from your little bosom be a communion with the anguish that reigns there !”

Quick is the restoration of the *happy* mother, after the first perils which attend her hours of confinement. When the heart is light, the pulse soon recovers
its

its vigour; but, when a fixed sorrow spreads its cankerous spell over the dearest fibres of the bosom, where is the medicine to restore, with speed, the flush of health on an exhausted cheek? A new comfort Matilda assuredly possessed, and one that rendered the return of strength a source of self-gratulation;—need it be said that this comfort sat on the smiling lip of her unconscious babe?

Never did the hours measure, with airy steps, the progress of the day, but they dropped a fresh flower, of irresistible beauty, on the cheek of Matilda's infant. Never did she strain it to her bosom, without a throb of rapture unfelt, unknown before.

When she was able to rise, and sustain her infant on her knee, the action seemed to unfold a new charm in the mother's
duty,

duty, and the attitude to present the child in fresh tints of loveliness. When it hovered to her, sedulous of warmth, she must needs think that fondness induced the instinctive motion; and even if it cried, when absent from her arms, she fancied that it wailed because it was not near her!—So sweet, so grateful is the infatuation which links a mother to her painful charge, and which leads her to despise all the pangs of life, or all the bitterness of death, when her infant offspring demands from her the sacrifice of dying, or, haply, the greater anguish of cherishing existence. Thus supported, Matilda returned to pensive health. For *her child's welfare* she endeavoured to forget the past—for *her child's welfare* she struggled to avoid all anticipation of the future;—her child was her only care, and the

the present the only point of time towards which she wished to direct a glance.

Yet, as she gained strength, would a wandering thought sometimes intervene, which little savoured of peace or contentment. The name of Cuthbert she intended never more to pass her lips; but the cold marble bands of the tomb were too weak to restrain his image from visiting her fancy.—And when she thought of Cuthbert, ah! how natural was it to shudder on reflecting that the babe she held claimed another father! Bitter tears steeped the child's forehead, though she dared not to look on its face, while this thought tyrannized over her mind.

At other times, (blush for Matilda, but still was she the child of Nature!) she would grow listless and dejected while
contemplating

contemplating her infant. She would sink into a gentle reverie, and then unchastized thoughts revelled in her imagination. She fancied the joy which her withered heart would have known in presenting such a babe of promise to the husband of her love. She mournfully pictured the transport with which he would have viewed the babe, and would have pressed both mother and child to his full bosom! In these moments she gazed on the little sleeping boy till her wandering mind (what will not dejection fancy?) believed that it discovered a resemblance between the lost Cuthbert and those of her lovely child! Awhile she mourned over her dormant charge, in wild and vacant fancies; then she started from the painful day-dream, as the maniac abandons a soothing vision, and returned,

turned, with tears, to all the reality of hopeless sorrow !

But not such were many of her reflections. Much oftener the image of sir Everard stood disclosed to her anguished imagination. These were perilous moments for her child's future peace ; yet Matilda shortly found that it was quite possible to love with fervor, as *her own*, the infant on whose father she looked with unconquerable repugnance.

Even while she revelled, with the fondest joy, in the smiles of her babe, she cherished a deep and unmitigated wish for never more beholding the man authorized to divide with her the blessing of parental pleasure.

Alas ! had any obtrusive tongue informed her, in these moments, that sir

Everard was still alive, what would have been her feelings?

CHAP. XII.

THE sickness of earl Rowland had prevented all communication between him and his daughter, save such as was contained in ceremonious interchanges, during the first weeks of Matilda's confinement. It was not without hesitation that her attendants informed Matilda of the protracted illness of the earl; nor did the tidings meet her ear, until she had regained

gained so much appearance of strength and serenity, that lady Gilibert deemed her entirely recovered.

The day was far advanced when she acquired information respecting her father's prostration of spirit and incapacity of body. The sun was already half-veiled in clouds of purple-coloured fire; yet Matilda determined on immediately repairing to her father's suffering couch. When the weakened mind seizes an idea or cherishes a purpose, the hand is strong indeed which can restrain it from its object. Endearing argument and strenuous remonstrance proved alike unavailing; and a page was dispatched to request earl Rowland's permission for her approach.

Although the earl was little prepared for the interview, he did not hold it meet to gainsay his daughter's intention; and

the instant in which the page returned was the signal for Matilda to quit her chamber ; yet, with careful haste, her maidens caused mats to be spread along the uncovered portion of the galleries ; and many a God-speed welcomed her footfall as she trod towards the room of her sick parent.

When she entered the earl's apartment, she found him reclining on his day-couch. He half-rose to congratulate her approach, and then sank again supine on the embellished couch which cradled his languid frame.

Matilda now took her child from the arms of the attendant, and bade her retire. " Most honoured lord, and beloved father !" said Matilda, " I bring a comforter all void of guile, as innocent as the white modest blossom which harbin-
gers

gers the spring ! to spread his little hands towards the Heavens, and so to tend a prayer (though he knows not its purport) for your restoration to health, and all the joys which health affords.”

The earl regarded not Matilda. His eyes were engrossed by the sturdy wrestlings of the child which she presented. He contemplated each feature; he pressed the chubby dimpled hands; then rising, (as if endued with new vigour on the instant,) he took the babe in his arms, and held it straight before his gaze. “By the soul of my forefathers !” cried he, “this is indeed an Evelyn ! Fly hence, ye fiends, who stand, united by a burning chain, around my couch ! Give a moment to anticipation !—look on me, boy ! By Heaven, he regards me, and

my visage scares him not! Perish all thoughts of the days which gave you being! Let me look for the germ of martial virtue on your cheek—ah! is it in that soft smile that the cause of Rowland shall be perpetuated?—yes! even so heroes look when female hands supply their puny wants;—and this same boy, all wailing and plastic as he seems, shall wield my heaviest sword of battle in defence of the coronet which encircles his brow! The thought strikes new fire to my soul!—Yes; Rowland shall live again in the high deeds even of this smiling babe!”

He started from the couch on which he had reclined, and as he returned the child to its mother, he threw aside the cloak which had enwrapped him while he sought,

sought, in the light of day, the slumber which he wooed, with bootless rhetoric, to visit his nightly pillow.

Matilda beheld, with amazement, that he wore, beneath his cloak, a glittering breast-plate of steel! "Alas, my father!" cried she, under the impulse of the moment, "what dangers threaten this loyal castle, that I see your honoured frame locked up in armour?"

"In armour, child!" said the earl, shrinking back, and striving to disguise his encasement, beneath the mantle which he had thrown aside; "haply, your eyes—but who dares question the purport of the earl of Waltham? Daughter! heed me, if you please; but, as you treasure peace, be silent."

Matilda bowed, and pressed her child to her bosom with a deep sigh.

A languid expression of horror returned to the earl's cheek. His emotion nearly overpowered him, and he gasped for utterance while he said—"My illness, no doubt, strikes you with amazement?—yes, doubtless, the wonder throughout the castle is great!—It may be, that strange rumours have reached even your pillow!"

"Indeed, my honoured father!" replied Matilda, "your lengthened indisposition is new to me. Think not that any whisper could be so presumptuous as to approach my ear."

"You cheer me!" cried the earl; "I did not think that any ear had been too sanctified to admit whispers against *my* peace!—I thought that even the winds had borne rumour abroad, and that my name had been the general buz with

with all who ever saw the turrets of Waltham."

"Dear father!" cried Matilda, "let the mourner speak comfort. I know—Oh God! (and she pressed her hand to her forehead) too well I know the oppressive fancies which spread their baneful spell over the bed of lassitude; but let not my honoured lord, the bravest in all the chivalry of this potent land, sink, the prey of shadowy tortures which even a daughter's weak hand has power to throw aside!"

The earl half rose, and leant on one hand as he addressed himself to speaking: "Methinks thou vauntest, fair daughter," said he, "of the fortitude with which thou hast combated affliction!—and is it even so!" (here Matilda would have interrupted him, with tears of filial reverence,

rence, but he waved his hand in token of silence.) “ Listen, then,” continued he, with wild earnestness, “ and tremble !— When weary, aching, oppressed nature draws down, perforce, my groaning spirit to convulsive slumber, I am infested with a wild gibbering concourse of sprites, who strain my muscles till they writhe with tortuous shortness !— Then, if, perchance, I recover from the sudden burst of agony, and return to sleep, these malicious fiends push sharp prongs through my pillow, which seem to enter my brain, and which cause all these matted locks to stand on end upon my throbbing head !— What mortal could endure such sufferance ? Last night I started (though sorely enfeebled by the sickness which presses on my soul !) from off my haunted couch. I crossed my room,
and

and gazed from the window, on the ramparts, and all the fast and goodly bulwarks which are ranged below :—But did I draw comfort from the view ?—Oh God ! on the summit of the northern tower, where my banner is wont to be suspended on days of festival, or when I summon my vassals to warfare, I beheld a flame of blue fire, in the midst of which appeared a bleeding human heart ; and I saw a stream of gore fall through the livid flame ! I hurried back to my bed, and the agony I felt forced drops of fear to my forehead, even in this minute.”

Matilda listened, with pity and solicitude, to this strange wandering tale. She drew towards her father ; she contemplated him, for a time, in speechless sorrow ; and was in the act of inclining gently towards his anguished frame, with
her

her child pliant on her bosom, (the sweetest whisperer of comfort!) when she paused, for she thought that she beheld one of the tapestry-bedecked compartments of the wainscot move, in slow progress, before her eye! she looked more earnestly, and saw that such was indeed the case. The pannel slowly and without noise slipped aside, and the figure of a female appeared in the aperture. A veil descended to her feet; her step was that of apprehension; and her lip was hush as the slumber of a midnight aisle. Matilda was motionless in terror. The veiled female regarded her for some moments, and then silently re-closed the pannel; but while the deceptive tapestry was returning to its counterpart, muttered words, in an unknown and frightful cadence, sounded from the
space

space beyond the aperture, and low shrieks succeeded, which were faintly echoed, as if from side to side, of a vaulted passage; the female figure pushed close the pannel, with a hasty crash, and the earl started eagerly from his couch.

At that moment an unwonted darkness (or the fancy of Matilda moved in response to that of the earl) overspread the room, while a melancholy breeze seemed to murmur impending peril, as it swept along the rugged front of the castle.

Matilda folded her child in her arms, as she surveyed the awful scene.—“Spread your front before my infant, noble father!” cried she; “protect my babe even to the utmost.”

The earl, by this time, was erect, and had grasped the sword which lay beside him on his couch. The darkness disap-

peared—the wind was mute; he gazed vacantly around:—“I see no foeman, daughter!” exclaimed he; “be he forthcoming, and, whether man or fiend, earl Rowland’s sword is ready! Come within my arms, and bring your child;” (here Matilda flew to the shelter of his bosom.) “Now, let loose your vengeance!” said the earl, with a determined brow; “here stands the wreck of Waltham! I and my daughter, with our thrice-told treble hope sustained between us, challenge fate, and brave it to its farthest daring!—It is all delusion, daughter!” said the earl, faintly, and resting on the point of his sword. “Clouds will bring darkness; breezes will have murmurs:—Sooth your child in security—it is all delusion.”

A confused noise, like that of a hundred

dred voices all striving at once to utter different impressions of terror, now sounded from the lower-hall. Matilda listened with dismay, and the earl with desperation. The noise increased, and then a tremendous silence suddenly occurred.—“What mean these horrors?” said the earl, in a trembling voice. “Ah, woe is me! I have latterly, throughout the day, stationed my attending servitors at a distance from my chamber;—but I have a bugle—seek it, daughter; methinks I cannot readily find it—yet, even now, it lay beside my pillow.—On that summons they come.”

Matilda presented the horn to her father. He sounded, and his pages briefly appeared.

“Seek out the cause of yonder noise,” cried the earl; “I would be silent. Command

mand the warder to his post ! let fall—
alas ! I know not what I say ! Bring me
intelligence of these horrid outcries, on
the instant.”

After speaking these words, he sank on
his couch, oppressed through every fa-
culty by the exertion which he had un-
dergone. Matilda sat beside him, and
earnestly she requested him to order the
nurses to approach and bear her infant
from the room ; but all earl Rowland’s
mind was directed to the hall of clamour,
and no attention had he to spare even
for the demands of his daughter.

END OF VOL. III.

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